CLASSROOM
OF THE
ELITE
STORY BY
SYOUGO
KINUGASA
ART BY
TOMOSESHUNSAKU
NOVEL
7.5

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CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE
NOVEL 7.5

SATOU MAYA
SHINOHARA SATSUKI
MATSUSHITA CHIAKI
SAKURA AIRI
HASEBE HARUKA

KARUIZAWA KEI
AYANOKOUJI KIYOTAKA

CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE
NOVEL 7.5

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POSTSCRIPT

CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE

NOVEL 7.5

STORY BY

Syougo Kinugasa

ART BY

Tomoseshunsaku

Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment

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TRANSLATION: Timothy MacKenzie
ADAPTATION: Jessica Cluess
COVER DESIGN: Nicky Lim
INTERIOR LAYOUT & DESIGN: Clay Gardner
PROOFREADER: Rebecca Schneidereit, Stephanie Cohen
LIGHT NOVEL EDITOR: Nibedita Sen
PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Rhiannon Rasmussen-Silverstein
PRODUCTION MANAGER: Lissa Pattillo
MANAGING EDITOR: Julie Davis
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Chapter 1:
First Winter

IT WAS STILL SNOWING HARD on the morning of December twenty-fifth, a day of Christmas celebrations. People all over the world would be spending time with families or lovers, while some fortunate students here would spend it with their boyfriends and girlfriends.

Speaking of, it was almost time for the date I'd agreed to go on. I started getting ready, taking care to groom myself properly.

"I've been here over eight months now, huh?" I muttered. Time had flown since I enrolled at this school. Maybe I enjoyed being here, at least a little.

I gently opened my balcony window, letting in a cold wind. I heard girls laughing. It sounded like they were heading to Keyaki Mall.

"I should probably get going."

It was already past eleven o'clock, and I'd promised to go out with Satou Maya today. I had no idea what, if anything, was going to happen—but I had a feeling that this day would be significant.

Falling in love with someone. Considering them precious. Sharing happiness merely by being together. Elation. I wondered whether I'd ever be able to experience such strong feelings.

This winter-vacation story began on December twenty-third, the day before Christmas Eve.

Chapter 2:
Love's Arrow

DECEMBER TWENTY-THIRD. Clear skies. I woke up feeling great, so refreshed that I almost couldn't believe it. Even though I'd just gotten out of bed, I felt as though I was still dreaming.

I felt different. What'd changed, exactly? If someone asked me, I'd have said nothing at all. But that wouldn't really have been true. There *had* been a change. A dramatic one.

I, Karuizawa Kei, was now free of my horrible past. No, that wasn't it—it was more like I'd gained enough power to overcome that past.

It'd happened yesterday, after the second semester's closing ceremony. Ryuuen Kakeru summoned me to the roof and bullied me viciously. It sounds lame when I say it like that, but it's the truth.

Faced with his cruelty, I hit rock bottom. I thought I was cursed, doomed to hell once more. I'd run to this school in search of salvation, only to be trapped all over again. I learned shocking things that day on the roof. I learned that Kiyotaka had goaded Manabe and her friends into bullying me. At first, I felt despair. Then anger.

But, in the end, I was saved. By Kiyotaka.

When I left the roof, the former student council president and Chabashira-sensei were waiting for me. They didn't say much, but they were considerate, taking care to avoid attracting attention. If it weren't for them, I probably wouldn't have made it back to the dorms. They told me that they were acting on Kiyotaka's instructions. Maybe they knew that was the only way to put me at ease.

I thought of what'd happened on that rooftop. If I'd had the power to shake off my past, I wouldn't have been afraid. No one would've discovered who I was in junior high.

But that wasn't really true, was it? This was my fault, too. I'd acted arrogant to make myself look big and strong. No wonder Manabe and her friends had hated me. My attempts to save myself from bullying just got me bullied again.

“Ahh,” I sighed. Not a bad sigh, exactly. A sigh filled with emotion? I didn’t know how to describe it. I was certain of only one thing—whether I was asleep or awake, Kiyotaka was always on my mind. Since yesterday, I hadn’t been able to stop thinking about him.

Even though I didn’t have a fever, I felt hot. I closed my eyes, trying to suppress that heat.

Ayanokouji Kiyotaka. First year, Class D.

At first, I hadn’t noticed he even existed. He was just a background classmate, that’s all. Some classmates thought he was cool or whatever, but I wasn’t interested. Besides, they forgot Kiyotaka soon after. You had to be able to talk to people to be popular, and Kiyotaka lacked that skill. It didn’t matter how good you were at school or sports—if you couldn’t make others *want* to follow you, you’d never have a lot of influence. That was why Yousuke-kun, Class A’s Tsukasaki-kun, and Class B’s Shibata-kun were way more popular than Kiyotaka.

As it turned out, though, the real Kiyotaka *was* a good talker. He was smart, mature, calm, and so good at sports that he even held his own against seniors. He was also unbelievably strong.

He could be cruel and coldhearted, too, but…well…he’d still saved me in the end.

“Huh?!” Wait a minute. Had I…? *Don’t tell me that I… For Kiyotaka…* “No! No, no, no! No way!”

I held my hands over my beet-red face and shook my head. Blushing like this, I was acting like a fairy-tale princess in love for the first time. I mean, I *would’ve* liked to fall in love. But…part of me just didn’t want to admit that I thought about Kiyotaka that way.

“Yeah. There’s just no way. I mean, it’s because of him that all those bad things happened to me.”

If anything, Kiyotaka should’ve been grateful that I wasn’t holding a grudge. Stealing my heart, on top of everything else? I couldn’t forgive such selfishness.

I brushed my messy hair in front of my mirror, wondering whether a normal person could’ve forgiven Kiyotaka for everything he did. Probably not. Actually, it’d be impossible. They’d *definitely* bear him a grudge. Only a person with a generous heart, like me, could forgive such a thing. *Just be satisfied with that, Kiyotaka*.

As I talked to myself, I tried to shake off my wild fancies. I didn't know what to say when I was actually in front of him, though. I couldn't tell Kiyotaka that I already forgave him. *Maybe I should give him a hard time? Let him know I was angry that he used me?*

While I thought about that, a message popped up on my phone. *Today at eleven. I'm counting on you, Karuizawa-san.*

"Ah, yeah. *That* thing."

The text was from my classmate Satou Maya. She'd told me that she wanted to meet up and get some advice from me. Satou-san and I belonged to different friend groups, so we didn't usually interact all that much. Of course, it wasn't that we didn't get along. We did. But this was the first time she'd invited me to hang out alone.

"Despite everything, I'm feeling pretty good," I said to myself.

Given that I'd had buckets of water dumped over my head in the freezing outdoors yesterday, I was proud of how well I was holding up. I'd taken a hot bath right after, but a normal girl probably would've caught a cold. She might've slept for three days and nights after torture like that.

"I'm just used to that kind of treatment, I guess."

The self-deprecating joke slipped out almost too easily. I thought I'd changed who I was, but really, I hadn't. I'd been terrified of bullying ever since I started at this school, and that darkness had always been there, deep in my heart.

Now, however, I saw everything clearly. Maybe I could change.

I took off my pajamas and stood in my underwear. I couldn't stop looking at the scars on my body, but they didn't bother me as severely anymore. It was unbelievable how much I could change in one day.

Still, I absolutely couldn't let a boy glimpse those scars, since girls should have soft, smooth, beautiful skin. *I'm sure the sight would cool even the hottest love. Although…*

Kiyotaka was different. He'd looked at my scars without disgust. Maybe he hadn't wanted to say how repulsive they were. Or maybe it'd been, like, really dark in that room on the ship. Or maybe he was too busy intimidating me to be grossed out.

Maybe, deep down in his heart, he thought I was disgusting. Or… maybe he didn't.

As I went over the memory again and again, I realized something. “Wait. He touched me, didn’t he? He put his hands on me.”

It hadn’t really sunk in back then, but that’d happened, hadn’t it? He touched my thighs. I’d never even held hands with a boy before. What in the world had he done to me?

“Augh! Jeez! I’m thinking about it again! I’m such an idiot!”

Enough with this! For the time being, I banished all thought of Kiyotaka and got dressed.

2.1

I WAS RUNNING LATE at this point, so I had to hustle. Students on winter vacation crammed Keyaki Mall, making it way more crowded than usual.

"I guess that makes sense. There isn't anywhere else to go," I muttered to myself.

I made it to the café in the nick of time, waving to Satou-san, who waited by the entrance with her cell phone in her hand.

"Good morning, Satou-san," I said.

"Ah, Karuizawa-san! Good morning!" Her eyes sparkled as she waved back. She must've just gone to the salon or something, because her hair was styled beautifully.

I hid my exhaustion. No one could know about yesterday's torture on the rooftop. I had to be my usual cheery self, which was why I'd agreed to meet Satou, even though I could've turned down her invitation. Besides, I'd been curious about what she was up to for a while.

"Sorry for inviting you so last minute," said Satou-san.

"Nah, it's no big deal."

"Whew! I'm so glad to hear that."

Satou-san looked delighted as we entered the café. It was completely packed, but a group got up to leave, allowing us to take their spot. Perfect timing.

"Wow, it sure is a full house," I remarked. It was absolutely crazy in here.

"I wonder if any classes have exams over winter break," said Satou-san. It sounded like she was thinking the same thing I was. We first years had gone to sea on a luxury cruise ship over summer break, but this time around, there didn't seem to be any special exams in the works.

I wondered whether the school was being merciful by giving us winter break off. Or maybe there'd be some kind of exam as soon as the

new year started. I hoped not.

"If you haven't eaten breakfast, go ahead and order anything you want. My treat," said Satou-san with a smile. Taking her up on that kind offer, I ordered an American scone and a café au lait.

Satou-san and I sat down at our small table for two.

"So, what did you wanna talk to me about?" I asked. If she was paying me in food, it had to be a pretty big ask.

"Y-yeah. Here's the thing. To tell you the truth, I…I'm gonna go on a date soon," said Satou-san.

"A date?" I was surprised, but I kept my shock and minor anxiety in check.

"Yeah," said Satou-san, her face turning red.

I had a bad feeling about this. If I wasn't misreading Satou-san, her date was… "Uh, so, with who?" I replied. It seemed like she was waiting for me to ask.

"Well, with Ayanokouji-kun, actually. It's…pretty surprising, huh?" She sounded embarrassed, but happy.

I heard a slight ringing in my ears, but tried to pretend I was completely calm. I picked up the scone and took a large bite. Some crumbs landed on the tray. The inside of my mouth was all dry from the flaky pastry, so I washed the scone down with the café au lait.

"Oh. So, you're going after Ayanokouji-kun, huh? That definitely *is* a surprise." I knew Satou-san had liked Kiyotaka for a while, but since we'd never discussed it, this was probably the safest answer.

"I know, right? I'm a little surprised too, actually. But remember that relay race during the sports festival? When I saw Ayanokouji-kun run, well, I felt my chest tighten. I started falling for him, I guess."

Satou-san spoke with such excitement that it gave me secondhand embarrassment. She really did look like a fairy-tale princess in love.

"But he doesn't really stand out, does he?" I asked. "I mean, this is *you* we're talking about, Satou-san. I'm sure lots of other guys would be great for you. I dunno, maybe a guy like Tsukasaki-kun from that other class?" He was pretty handsome. A lot of girls were crushing on him at one point.

"I don't think so," Satou-san said. "It sounds like he's going out

with an upperclassman in his club."

So, someone had already nabbed him. No wonder no one talked about him anymore. Male or female, celebrities always took a hit to their popularity when they started a relationship.

"Ah, okay. I see. Well, how about Satonaka-kun? He should be single now, right?" I asked.

"Well, I think he's cool and all, but…I guess I just don't feel that way about him," Satou-san replied.

My attempts to suggest other, more popular guys weren't making much of an impression on her. It didn't seem as if she only liked Kiyotaka for his looks—not that he could compare to Tsukasaki-kun or Satonaka-kun in the looks department. Still, Kiyotaka was among the top-ten cutest boys in school, and Satou-san must've realized that fact.

A good-looking partner was a status symbol. Dating a cool guy or a cute girl was enough to boost your reputation. When I'd started "going out" with Hirata-kun, my star rose higher than I ever expected. If Satou-san started dating Kiyotaka now, her popularity might explode in the near future. If Kiyotaka revealed his real talents, his reputation might eclipse Hirata-kun's.

Even though Kiyotaka had gotten a lot of attention from the relay race, he still wasn't really popular with the girls—probably because of his quiet demeanor, plus the fact that he only ever seemed to talk to Horikita-san. Plus, most girls really disliked his guy friends, such as Ike-kun, Yamauchi-kun, and Sudou-kun.

In any case, Satou-san couldn't have spoken to Kiyotaka all that much before. Now she was crushing on him just from seeing him in that relay race the one time? Wasn't that kind of shallow? I knew Kiyotaka *way* better than she did. I knew his true nature. I knew the deep, dark part of him that Satou-san had no idea even existed.

Agggh! No, no! I had no reason to badmouth Satou-san. I needed to support her. Why? Because I was dating Hirata Yousuke-kun. I had no reason to block someone else's path to romance. I had to be Karuizawa Kei, Hirata-kun's girlfriend, leader of all the girls in Class D.

"Look, I know this might sound weird, but are you seriously going for him? For real?" I asked. The "real" Karuizawa Kei would ask that question in such a skeptical way.

“Yeah.” Satou-san answered without hesitation. She was determined. This wasn’t a prank.

“Well, it’s a good thing you found someone you like, right? Ayanokouji-kun should be single right now,” I said.

“That’s right. That’s why I thought this might be my chance. I felt like I had to hurry.”

It was the oldest tale in the book. You confessed your crush to a friend, and that friend snatched up the guy you liked. I understood why Satou-san was cautious. She probably figured that I was safe, since I already had a boyfriend who ranked higher in the class hierarchy than Kiyotaka.

Even so, I’d never imagined the two going on a date during winter vacation. Despite what’d happened on the rooftop, Kiyotaka really was going out with Satou-san, even though he didn’t seem interested in her at all.

Rip. I unconsciously tore open the paper wrapper on my straw.

“So, has our little chat got anything to do with your date?” I asked.

Satou-san’s eyes sparkled as she nodded. She was *annoyingly* radiant right now. “Yes. I just, like, wanted to ask what makes a successful date. You know? I wondered how you and Hirata-kun got together.”

Yousuke-kun and I were the only ones in our class who’d announced our relationship. If Satou had sought help from people in other classes, their response would probably have been something like, “Kiyotaka? Who’s that?” It made perfect sense that she came to me for help.

“Karuizawa-san, you started going out with Hirata-kun soon after we started at this school, right?” she continued.

“Yep. Well, I guess so. Yeah. It’s really not a big deal.”

“But it *is* a big deal. It’s amazing. I totally respect you!” Satou-san grasped both my hands in hers. “Please, teach me your ways! Your skills!”

“It’s not like a ‘skill’ or anything.”

I couldn’t give Satou-san the answers she was looking for. At the

start of the year, I'd only just escaped the hideous bullying from my junior high days. I was determined to make my high school experience better, so I approached Hirata-kun and asked for his help. Looking back now, I was lucky he was such a good guy. It'd been a huge gamble. If he'd refused to play my pretend boyfriend, my life would've been very different now.

But Yousuke-kun was the kind of guy who genuinely wanted peace and harmony. If he could help me by pretending to be my boyfriend, he was happy to do it. I could tell he was a good person, which was why I'd chosen him.

Being his "girlfriend" worked out better than I ever could've imagined. Some other girls in class seemed jealous at first, but that went away soon. I remembered how the popular girls had acted at my old school and copied their behavior. I went out a lot, shopped indulgently, demanded that girls give me money. Before long, I was queen bee of the Class D girls.

And I was living a lie. Satou-san asked me to give her tips on romance, but I had none to give. How could someone who'd never had a boyfriend know the secret to dating?

I didn't want to let Satou-san down. The old me would've faked her way through it, boldly showing off "knowledge" she'd come across in magazines or on TV. But I was changing. I didn't want to disappoint Satou-san, who'd put her trust in me, but I was sick of playing an arrogant, self-absorbed girl. I wanted to tell Satou-san the truth about myself.

I couldn't, though. I had to be Yousuke-kun's confident girlfriend. I lived a lie to keep myself safe. But did I still need to live that way? Was fake-dating Yousuke-kun still necessary? These thoughts swirled through my mind.

Manabe, Ryuuen, and their friends had been a real threat to me, but Kiyotaka took care of them. Now, no one would ever know I'd been bullied in the past. Even if something *did* happen down the road, I believed that Kiyotaka would save me.

Being Yousuke-kun's girlfriend came with a ton of advantages, but I wouldn't instantaneously lose my position in class if I stopped seeing him, right? I mean, asking Yousuke-kun to "break up" after I'd asked him to "date" me would be pretty lame, but I had a feeling it'd work out well. If it did, I'd be single and free…and able to go after my true love.

Wait—I couldn't think about this stuff right now. Satou-san was waiting for me to give her an answer. I could ponder my fake relationship with Yousuke-kun later.

"So, you don't want this to be—like—something casual, do you?" I said. "You're saying that you want a *serious* date with Ayanokouji-kun. Something that'll make you an official couple, right?"

"Yes," she answered. She wanted Kiyotaka to fall for her tonight. "What should I do?"

"Let's see…" *Think.* How to help Satou-san start dating Kiyotaka?

I had no idea how to make a guy fall for you. Besides, Kiyotaka was clearly different from other guys. Would a normal romance even satisfy him? Or maybe he was the sort of guy who secretly longed for a normal romance. It was hard for me to tell either way.

While I debated what to do, Satou-san took out her phone. "Maybe I'm being too vague. Umm, you see, I'm still a total amateur when it comes to this. I've been trying to make up the perfect date. What do you think?" She showed me the plan she'd typed on her phone.

Meet at noon à *Lunch* à *Movie theater* à *Shopping* à *Romantic confession under the legendary tree?* à *Present*

It looked incredibly simple. Well, lists made everything look simple.

One detail immediately jumped out at me. "Wait a second. Are you planning on telling him you *love* him during your first date?"

"I guess I thought I'd go big or go home—but only if I can summon up the courage."

I thought she'd want to deepen their relationship bit by bit, slowly but surely. She was more decisive than I'd imagined.

"Don't you think you're going, like, too fast?" I asked. "I mean, it'd be fine if you waited until the second or third date. You'd still be moving at a good clip. Besides, you might find out something about him that you don't really like."

Even girls with romantic experience sometimes didn't know how to start a new relationship, and Satou-san seemed like an absolute beginner. I hoped she'd take things slowly.

Though, as another total beginner, what'd I know?

“Also, what’s ‘the legendary tree’?” I added. “One of those things where, if you swear your love under it, you’ll be together forever or something?”

Did this school even have a tree like that? Was it an urban legend? Even if that mysterious power really existed, binding yourself irrevocably to someone for ten or twenty years sounded like a bad thing.

“Well, it’s not really that famous. I saw something about it on the school bulletin board. It said that, if you tell someone how you feel under the tree, they’ll like you back. It sounded like there’re a lot of stories of it working.”

Hunh. Maybe I should look into it. I pulled up the school’s bulletin board forum on my phone and saw that the stories were true. The tree existed, and several successful romantic confessions had happened there. Apparently, some bigshot gave the tree to the school when it was founded. The tree was supposed to be over fifty years old now.

From what I read, the romantic confession had to take place in the evening, before sunset, sometime between four and five o’clock. The posts also stated that no one else could be around. If you met all the conditions, there was a 99 percent chance you’d succeed.

That sounded pretty fishy.

“Isn’t such specific timing difficult to pull off, though?” I asked.

“Yeah. They say that if anyone else shows up the moment you say how you feel, it won’t work.”

Being alone seemed like a tall order, especially because lots of people would be around at that time of day. Besides, what if a whole bunch of couples wanted to test the theory at the same time? This really just sounded like superstition, but people would do anything for the sake of making some once-in-a-lifetime romantic confession successful. If it were me, I’d probably want to raise my chances of success any way I could, too.

“Um, so…like, why did you fall in love with Ayanokouji-kun?” I asked.

“Huh? Why?”

“Sorry,” I added. “It’s just that I don’t know anything about him. It’s hard to even picture him. Like, just what’re you attracted to? If you

tell me, it'll give me ideas for your date."

Satou-san's cheeks went red with embarrassment. She hid her face with her hands as she spoke. "Hmm. Well, first of all, he's really cool, isn't he? He's so quiet and mature. Also, he's a fast runner. He scores higher than me on tests, so he's not an idiot. You know, besides Hirata-kun, most of the guys in our class are really immature."

She probably meant Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun. I definitely agreed on that point—most of the boys acted like total children. It was hard to believe we were all the same age. No wonder most girls went after upperclassmen.

"Pl-please keep this just between us," Satou-san added. "Don't tell the other girls, okay? I don't want them to figure out how great Ayanokouji-kun is, or how inexperienced I am."

"It's okay to talk about it with me, though?"

"Well, you're Hirata-kun's girlfriend. There's no competition."

Satou-san was relying on me. It felt nice to be valued…but why did it have to be Kiyotaka? If this were about any other guy, I would've supported her fully and honestly. I wouldn't feel so mixed up. Was this just cruel fate?

"Ahh." I couldn't help but let out a sigh. This one was heavy.

Satou-san's expression turned sad. "I…I'm being a bother, aren't I?" she asked.

"Oh, sorry. I didn't sigh about that at all. Honest." I felt as if a cloud hung over my heart. It wasn't like I was in love with Kiyotaka or anything, though. I just…had a unique relationship with him. Still, right now, I had to help Satou-san. "Okay, let's revisit your date plan. It might be better to schedule lunch for after the movie. That way, if things get weird, you can always talk about the movie or whatever."

"Okay. Good idea, Karuizawa-san." Satou-san took out her phone.

"So, when's the big date?" I pulled up the movie theater's homepage to check whether the ticket times could be changed.

"The day after tomorrow."

"Okay, pretty soon. Wait—the day after tomorrow?! That's the twenty-fifth!" I almost stood without thinking, but caught myself. Flustered, I sat back down.

“Hee hee!” Satou-san giggled.

Don’t you “hee hee” me!

December twenty-fifth. One of the most important days of the entire year. Ugh—*Kiyotaka*! What the hell was he thinking, going on a date on Christmas?! That was a day for lovers to spend time together and deepen their relationship. A day to confirm their love. It wasn’t meant for *starting* a relationship.

He should’ve gently declined and suggested moving their date to the twenty-sixth. Actually, that might’ve backfired, too. It might have gotten him slapped with a reputation for being a guy who only wanted to be naughty, not nice.

I was so worried that my brain was going haywire. I sighed again.

“What’s the matter, Karuizawa-san?”

“Uh, nothing. Don’t worry about it.” Why was I getting all flustered? It was none of my business. I had no say in the specifics of their date. That was for them to decide. “The twenty-fifth, huh? Well, I guess it’s better than Christmas Eve.”

Movie theaters were packed on Christmas Eve. If you didn’t care too much about the time of the showing or where you sat, you could spend the whole day there.

“So, if you start watching the movie at 11:50, it’ll be over around 1:30,” I continued. “If you start lunch before two, you can probably leave the restaurant around three. That gives you time to tell him your feelings after four. Good?”

Satou-san gave a satisfied nod.

“You’d better make reservations for lunch, too,” I added. “You want seats near the window, right?” Since it wouldn’t be peak lunch-hour traffic, I was sure she could make a reservation. “Also, if you order in advance, the restaurant can make you things that aren’t on the everyday menu.”

“I never even thought of that. Just what I’d expect from you, Karuizawa-san!”

I thought people should accommodate a special Christmas date. Honestly, the boy should’ve been the one making these arrangements. Still, this was setting the stage for Satou-san’s romantic confession, so it was probably fine.

Probably. I wasn't sure. Pathetic as it was, I'd never been on a real date.

2.2

AFTER SATOU-SAN AND I TALKED, we headed back to the dormitory. We kept chatting as we walked.

"The snow's really been coming down since this morning. They say it's supposed to snow even more from tomorrow," she said.

I glanced around us. We might have snow on campus all the way to the new year if it kept falling at this rate.

Snow reminded me of the year before last. I remembered someone telling me that muddy snow was chocolate shaved ice before stuffing it into my mouth. For once, I recalled that memory from far away, as if I were fondly reminiscing. Somehow, it seemed so long ago.

"What was so fun about doing something like that, anyway?" I asked aloud.

"Eh?" said Satou-san.

"Oh, sorry. Just talking to myself." Maybe because of what'd happened yesterday, memories kept coming back to me.

Satou-san's expression stiffened. I thought it was because I'd been talking to myself, but apparently, that wasn't it. "Actually, um, there's one more favor I wanted to ask."

"Well, don't hold back. Hit me," I replied, thumping my chest for added emphasis.

"Thanks, Karuizawa-san. You see, um, I'm really happy to be going on a date, but…this is the first date I've ever been on. I have no idea what to do."

"You've never gone out with a boy before?" I asked.

Well, based on what she said earlier, it made sense. Still, I'd assumed that a trendy girl like her had at least gone on a date.

Satou-san shook her head, looking embarrassed. "I'm telling you this because you're, well, *you*, Karuizawa-san. I've never gone on a date, and I'm starting my second year. If I told anyone else that, they'd laugh at me. They'd say I'm slow or something. You think so too, don't you, Karuizawa-san?"

“W-well, no. You might be a late bloomer, but that just means it took a while to find someone you really like, yeah? It means you respect yourself too much to settle for less.” Even as I lied, I supported her. Not for Satou-san’s sake, but for my own.

“Thank you for saying that,” she replied. “Well, um, here’s the thing. I think I’m going to be so nervous that it might mess up the date. So, I was wondering if maybe you and Hirata-kun could come along and make it a double date? I want you to be my wingwoman!”

I couldn’t believe what I’d just heard. “D-double date?! W-wingwoman?”

“I really should’ve asked sooner, right? I had you help with all the reservations and stuff, too,” said Satou-san sheepishly.

The reservations hadn’t really been a big deal. What mattered was that she wanted me, someone totally inexperienced in romance, to play Cupid. What could be more hilariously wrong?

“It’s probably a bad idea,” Satou-san added. “Right?”

“Well, that’s—” *I should say no.* I was sure to mess up, exposing my inexperience for all to see. *Augh!* Since this was Satou-san’s first date, though, maybe she wouldn’t notice? *Should I act cool and composed, and cheerfully accept?* “Well, I was thinking I’d like to spend Christmas alone with Hirata-kun. Just the two of us, you know?”

Normal partners would probably also spend tomorrow and the day after together. That should’ve been an obvious conclusion, but my mind was still racing. I agonized over what to do.

“Oh.” Satou-san looked anxious. “It’s just…you and Hirata-kun are so perfect together. I want to have a relationship like yours.”

From Satou-san’s perspective, I smoothly sailed through life. That wasn’t true, of course, but…something kept bothering me, and it wasn’t Kiyotaka.

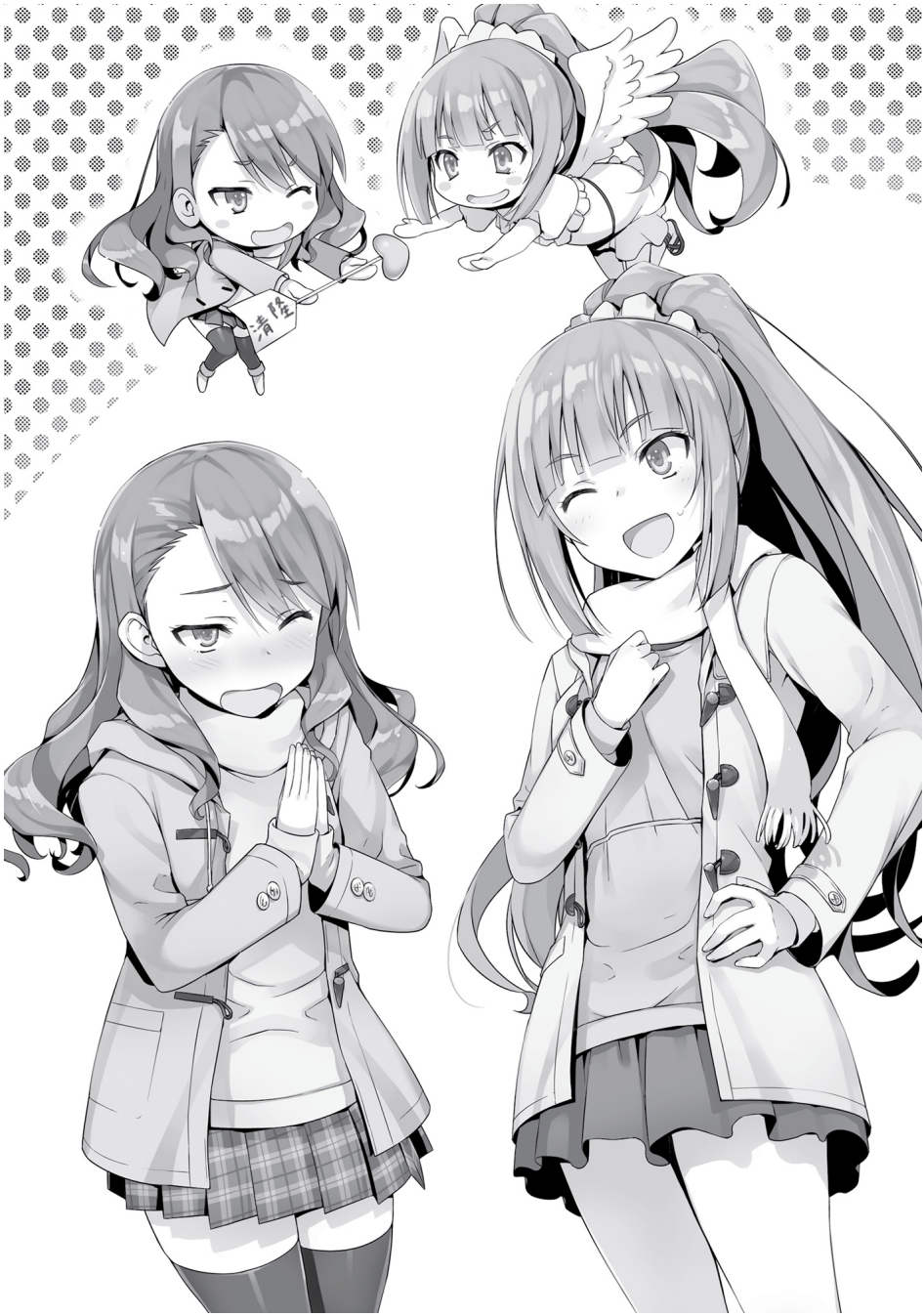
I didn’t actually like Yousuke-kun in that way, and we weren’t actually dating. We were a fake couple. As long as we continued, neither of us could find true love. The thought nagged at me.

Even Kiyotaka wasn’t attracted to me. How could my lies help Satou-san?

“Well, I don’t know.” I thought I might decline, but I stopped myself.

Constantly thinking of Kiyotaka wasn't good for me. I needed to get him off my mind. If I could encourage him and Satou-san to get together, then… Well, it'd eliminate the possibility of Kiyotaka dating me, unlikely as it was.

"L-Leave it to me. I'll handle it," I said.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“Really?! Thank you, Karuizawa-san!” Satou-san took my hands, hopping up and down.

She really does like him that much, huh? In that case, I should support her first love. I scooped up some snow and pressed it against my forehead to cool off.

As I did, I reflected.

I wasn’t the person I’d been in junior high. I wasn’t the same despair-filled girl of three years ago. I wasn’t even the same student who started school here eight months earlier. Playing a part for my classmates hadn’t set me free; it’d been a way to protect myself. That was no good. If someone needed your help, you had to be honest. You couldn’t be a true friend otherwise.

But, if I went on the double date, other issues would come up. First, I had to know whether Yousuke-kun was available. Since the whole school knew we were together, we didn’t need to appear in public much, so we’d meant to relax and take it easy this Christmas. If someone asked what we did, we’d decided we would just tell them we had a date in one of our dorm rooms. Even if someone saw us outside alone during the day, we could say we had plans in the evening.

“Oh…um…one more thing,” said Satou-san. “I kind of hoped you could act like you and Hirata-kun met up with Ayanokouji-kun and me by accident.”

Jeez, another request. “You don’t want it to be, like, a pre-established double date?”

“Is that all right?”

“Oh, it’s fine.” Of course she wouldn’t want that. I thought about it, then advised, “Let’s not go that route. I think it’s probably better to say up front that you want this to be a double date.”

“I see. What if Ayanokouji-kun doesn’t like that, though?” asked Satou-san.

“Won’t he be more upset if he finds out later that we manipulated him?”

“Yeah, you’re probably right.” She looked troubled.

“It’s up to you, Satou-san.” I couldn’t force her one way or the other, but I thought lying to Kiyotaka was a bad idea. Sooner or later,

he'd figure it out…not that I could tell Satou-san that. Saying something like, "Kiyotaka's surprisingly perceptive. Don't try to trick him," would be weird. As far as anyone knew, Kiyotaka and I never hung out.

However, I couldn't definitively say that a double date was a *bad* thing. Maybe I'd go online and find an article to help. Something like *Why Double Dates Are Ideal for Beginners*.

"Could you just join up with us naturally on the day of our date? I think that'd be good," said Satou-san. My suggestion of honesty clearly hadn't found purchase. She wanted to keep our double date covert.

"If you're fine with that, sure. I don't mind." Now, all that was left was to keep Kiyotaka from noticing our deception. Maybe this was a good time to test how much I could sneak past him. "If Yousuke-kun doesn't want to go on a double date for whatever reason, I'm sorry," I added.

With that disclaimer, we headed back to the dormitory.

2.3

WHEN I GOT TO MY ROOM, I lay on the bed with my phone in my hand and stared at the ceiling. A bunch of weird emotions welled up inside me.

My discussion with Satou-san, the fact that she loved Kiyotaka, her asking for my help to make them an official couple… That stuff pissed me off, but I also felt restless. *If this were just about romance, that'd be one thing. I think I'd be able to help Satou-san out. But…*

Did Kiyotaka plan to go on a date with Satou-san just to "study" what girls were like on dates? What if he wasn't interested in her romantically at all—but, instead, planned to use her like he did me? I might've been overthinking it, but this *was* Kiyotaka. I could never tell what he really thought.

Maybe he was dating her to see whether she could be useful to him. I was afraid that he saw Satou-san as the key to making his life at this school easier, the same way he'd once used me. What if Kiyotaka decided Satou-san was better than me? He might stop protecting me.

I picked up the phone and dialed, muttering, "I haven't even memorized my *own* phone number, and yet…"

All I had to do now was touch the call icon. What did I even plan on asking him? *Do you really think Satou-san will be more useful than me?* No, that was stupid. It sounded as if I *wanted* him to use me, and that wasn't true. I just, well, wanted to protect myself. I wanted my Kiyotaka protection policy. Yeah. That was obviously it.

"Maybe I'll try asking him directly." I told my thumb to hit "call," but my thumb didn't budge. It wouldn't even touch the screen. In the end, I couldn't make myself do it. "I'm such an idiot," I sighed.

What I really wanted to ask was, "Are you done using me?"

Then my phone rang. "Huh?!" It was Kiyotaka's number. "H-hello?" I stammered, answering in a panic.

"I want to ask you something." His tone was the same as always, flat and apathetic.

"What? What do you want to ask?"

“Is anyone there right now?”

“No. I’m in my room.”

Maybe he wondered whether I was sick, and called to check. Even so, it was too late in the evening for him to call me like this. Still, my heart fluttered to think he cared.

But Kiyotaka crushed my hopes in a second. “I need you to investigate something for me, Karuizawa.”

“What? Didn’t you say you weren’t going to rely on me anymore? You told me to erase your contact information,” I snapped.

After what happened yesterday, shouldn’t he check on me? I didn’t expect something caring, like “You didn’t catch a cold, did you?” Still, it’d be nice to at least get an “I’m sorry,” or something like that.

Kiyotaka had manipulated Ryuuen and the others into bullying me. I should’ve hated him. Anyone else would’ve reported him to the school. The least he could do was apologize. Yet the first thing he said was “I need you to investigate something.”

Listen up, Kiyotaka. Who do you think you are? I don’t owe you anything anymore. Actually, you *owe* me *protection. For free.*

I ought to have said something bold like that, but those words remained stuck in my throat. I was afraid that if I actually did, Kiyotaka would walk away from me.

“What do you want me to investigate?” I asked instead.

“Satou.”

“Satou-san?” This situation was getting weirder and weirder. I said nothing about my meeting with her today. “What about her?”

“I want to know who she usually hangs out with. What her behavior patterns are. I’d also appreciate it if you could fill me in on her personality, hobbies, and likes and dislikes. If you already know all those things, our conversation will be brief.”

I don’t know any of that stuff. “Unfortunately, Satou-san and I hang out in different groups. I don’t know much about her.”

“Not very well-informed, eh? So, there’re lots of things that even *you,* the girls’ de facto leader, don’t know.”

“Hey, did *you* know you’re being a jerk right now?”

“If you don’t have the answers, then do some digging for me. I’d prefer that Satou remain in the dark about this,” he said.

“Well…if I ask Shinohara-san, I might be able to find out some things.”

“Do whatever you think would be best, please. I leave everything in your hands,” Kiyotaka told me.

“All right, fine. I’ll try asking around…but tell me the reason why.”

“Send me the details via e-mail.” Kiyotaka hung up without even responding to my question.

“What the hell is his deal? Ugh. God, I was an idiot to expect anything else from him.” *I should’ve coughed during the call or something to hint that I didn’t feel well.*

Grumbling, I sent a chat message to Shinohara-san. If nothing else, I could be proud of myself for acting professionally, even while Kiyotaka was being a jerk. Shinohara-san responded, and soon, I effortlessly turned the topic of conversation to Satou-san.

Shinohara-san and I chatted for a while, and once I’d gotten everything I could, I sent the information to Kiyotaka’s other e-mail address. I didn’t get a reply, as usual, but I was sure he got the message.

So, Kiyotaka was actually interested in Satou-san? He was clearly collecting information before the date to make sure it went well. If it did, would the two of them start going out for real? Or maybe…maybe he was trying to turn Satou-san into his pawn? I just couldn’t figure it out.

“Argh! Come on! What the hell’s up with that guy?!”

I couldn’t sleep that night. Tomorrow would be a long day.

Chapter 3:
Ibuki Mio's Disastrous Day

IT WAS THE MORNING of December twenty-third, two days before my Christmas date with Satou, when I went alone to Keyaki Mall with a specific purpose. I walked briskly into a store and looked around for something I needed.

"I've never used this stuff before," I muttered.

After doing some online research, reading reviews, and asking a salesperson for their thoughts, I chose two of the item in question. The clerk put them in a small paper bag, and I paid. Astonished at how expensive they were, I left the store with the bag in hand and headed back toward the dormitory. All I needed to do now was pick up a few things at the convenience store, and then my plans would be in place. Afterward, I'd go to Keyaki Mall and watch a movie nearing the end of its theatrical run. That was my plan for the day.

However, my plan began to fall apart when I ran into a certain someone.

Before I reached the mall exit, a girl approached me slowly. She walked with a cane. "Good day to you, Ayanokouji-kun." It was First Year Class A student Sakayanagi Arisu, the school chairman's daughter, who knew my history with the White Room.

The school grounds appeared vast, but the spaces students could actually access were relatively compressed. You could bump into just about anyone when you were out.

"You're out and about early today, huh? Alone," I said. Sakayanagi usually had an entourage hanging around, but they were absent.

"I came to spend time with Masumi-san, but she's not here yet," Sakayanagi answered. She noticed the bag I carried. "Are you not feeling well?"

"Oh, no, I'm completely fine. Healthy as a horse." I spread my arms wide, showing her that I was okay, then put the small paper bag in my pocket.

“I’m glad to hear that. If you aren’t busy, would you like to hang out for a bit?” she asked.

I didn’t even try to pretend I wanted to. “I’ll pass, thanks. You’re conspicuous, and I don’t like drawing attention,” I told her.

“Heh. That’s a shame.”

At any rate, Sakayanagi almost certainly didn’t enjoy my company. She just wanted a chance to taunt me. If she intended for people to know about my time in the White Room, she would’ve acted already. But she’d told no one, not even Ryuuen.

Sakayanagi probably planned to deal with me on her own.

“Then I assume standing here and talking won’t be a problem?” she asked.

“You want to talk here? Any particular reason?”

“He gets ever so angry when I call him this, but Dragon Boy was after you, wasn’t he? ‘The puppet master who controls Class D’ was how he described you, actually. Whatever happened there?” she asked.

Only the people specifically involved should’ve known what happened on the rooftop, and how the matter resolved. Still, I wouldn’t have been surprised if she’d managed to get her hands on some information.

“It seems that there’s been a falling out between the Class C students. Things have gotten quite bad. Were you aware of that?” Sakayanagi added.

I was. The story was that Class C had suffered an “internal dispute.” I was sure Sakayanagi had heard about that.

“I don’t really know the details,” I replied.

“Supposedly, Dragon Boy quarreled with his underlings. But, somehow, that story doesn’t ring true. I was certain that *you* were involved, Ayanokouji-kun.”

“Why would I get mixed up in that? You’re assuming I’m this ‘puppet master,’ right? I just think the whole thing’s surprising. I mean, I thought that Class C was pretty organized.”

“Class C’s ‘pretty organized,’ hmm?”

“Well, they’re an efficient unit, even if it’s because they suffer under a dictator,” I said.

“I see. Well then, it seems you had nothing to do with the incident, Ayanokouji-kun. From what I can see, you don’t appear injured at all.” Sakayanagi watched my expressions and gestures closely, but she’d get nothing. “The story about Class C’s infighting may be true. However, Ryuuen seems no closer to moving in on Class D,” she added.

“Probably because there’re quite a few talented candidates for puppet master in Class D. Kouenji, in particular, is very capable,” I replied.

“I see. Well, Kouenji certainly seems like a suitable opponent for Dragon Boy. I suppose we’ll understand the truth of the matter once the third semester begins,” Sakayanagi said.

“Can we change the topic?”

“Yes, of course.” Sakayanagi didn’t comment on the bluntness of my request.

“When I saw you a few days ago, I thought it was strange that you and Ichinose were getting along so well. I didn’t think you’d be that friendly with someone from another class,” I said. I remembered Sakayanagi and Ichinose walking around together; they’d appeared close. You didn’t spend a precious day off with someone if you didn’t get along.

“Heh,” Sakayanagi chuckled. “Please, enough with the jokes. She and I aren’t friends, you know.”

“Meaning?” I asked.

“Actually, she thinks that you and *I* are close, Ayanokouji-kun.” Sakayanagi paused. “Since Class C seems so obsessed with Class D, I’ve gotten a little bit jealous. I like messing around with Class B to stave off boredom.” Toying with her opponents entertained her, apparently. “Once the third semester begins, will you play with me?”

“Sorry, but no. Play with Horikita and the others if you want,” I replied.

“She isn’t a suitable opponent for me.”

“Then pick a fight with Ryuuen or the senior students. I’d rather you just ignore me.”

“I’m afraid that’s impossible. I’d like to fight you as soon as I can, Ayanokouji-kun.” Sakayanagi wasn’t backing down. My humble act

probably wouldn't work on her. As long as she knew about the White Room, she wouldn't give up.

"If I just ignore you, what then?" I asked.

"Are you sure you can afford to do that? If you won't be my opponent, Ayanokouji-kun, I'll just have to find another. I'm afraid you can't hold me responsible if Class B, with which you've had such a collaborative relationship, collapses."

"So, you already selected your pawns, huh?" This conversation was starting to get entertaining.

"Until you're ready to play, Ayanokouji-kun, I'll amuse myself with Class B. Who knows? If that whole class falls apart, maybe you and the rest of Class D can rise one rank."

I wasn't ready to assume that Sakayanagi actually meant any of this. This might've been a provocation, or just her way of having fun. But if she turned her sights from me to Ichinose, she might leave me in peace.

"Can you really win against Ichinose and her class?" I asked.

"Whatever do you mean?"

"Class B has worked together since school started, while the Class A students have dragged each other down. Even if you claim you're more capable, your credibility's questionable."

"I see. You think that, because this is all hypothetical, you can go ahead and say whatever nasty things you like," Sakayanagi said. Her calm exterior was crumbling a bit.

I added a little more fuel to the fire. "I've also discovered your true identity. You're the school chairman's daughter."

"I see. How did you learn this information, I wonder?" Sakayanagi took the bait.

"That doesn't matter. What's clear is that your father's influence played some part in your assignment to Class A. I can't say for certain that you were selected for that class based on merit alone. You can boast about how you'll beat Ichinose, but I have trouble believing you."

I was betting Sakayanagi didn't like having people question her abilities.

"Then how do you explain the fact that many people within my

class support me?" she countered.

"Support from your class doesn't necessarily say anything about your abilities. Even Ryuuen and Ichinose, whom you deem beneath you, have their respective classmates' support. If we're talking about Class D, then Hirata does, too. He's the best example, even. The ability to bring people together doesn't always indicate skill in other areas," I reasoned.

Sakayanagi threw her cane to the ground. It clattered on the floor.

"It seems I can't use simple tricks against an opponent such as you," she said. "Transparent ploys won't work. My apologies for such rudeness. However, Ayanokouji-kun, do you think you might be getting a little arrogant? I think you're intoxicated with your own success—the first success to come out of the White Room. Don't you think?"

I hadn't thought about it that way before. If I had to describe myself as either a success or a failure, I'd undeniably be a success. If I weren't, then that man…my father…wouldn't be so obsessed with me.

"You seem mistaken about one thing, Ayanokouji-kun. You think the White Room made you remarkable, don't you? Certainly, the amount of knowledge you've acquired since childhood is extraordinary. And, while you've attempted to conceal your abilities here at this school, I have no doubts regarding the extent of your academic and athletic prowess. However, this institution is where the 'have-nots' receive the means to become geniuses, if at all possible. One might say that natural-born geniuses have no need for such a place," Sakayanagi said.

That was certainly what my father believed—that genetics were irrelevant, and greatness was a product of the education a person received from the moment of their birth. Controlling every aspect of how someone was raised, from their sleep schedule to what they ate, was how you created a superior individual. My father thought that this was the only way to produce the manpower that could take Japan into the future.

"Why're you so hostile toward me?" I asked.

"Beating you, Ayanokouji-kun, will prove that no ordinary person can defeat a natural-born genius. No matter how much effort you expend, we're different breeds. That's my hypothesis," she replied.

So, she didn't doubt the fact of her genius, huh?

At that point, Kamuro appeared behind us. She must've been searching for Sakayanagi.

"So, this is where you've been? You shouldn't just have left the spot we agreed to meet at. You're the one with bad legs, after all," Kamuro told Sakayanagi. She had to have noticed me, but she didn't make eye contact.

"I apologize. I arrived early, so I felt like taking a little walk," said Sakayanagi.

"In that case, at least let me know ahead of time."

Now that Kamuro was here, our conversation was pretty much over. Sakayanagi had absolutely no interest in making my abilities common knowledge. She'd hate it if others started gunning for me and snatched her prey from her.

"This may come off as rather sudden, Masumi-san," Sakayanagi said, "but what do you think of Ichinose Honami-san?"

"You're right. That really *is* sudden." Kamuro seemed puzzled. My presence likely made the question even more awkward.

"You see, I was just discussing how to conquer Ichinose-san with this young man here," said Sakayanagi.

"Conquer, huh? Well, if you ask me, Ichinose's a model student. She really cares for others, and she's good-natured. Is that what you mean?"

"Yes. Her being a model student is clear, isn't it? She always scores in the top percentile on tests, and she leads her class well. What do you think, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"I agree," I replied.

"Do you think that defeating a model student like Ichinose-san would be simple, Masumi-san?" Sakayanagi asked.

"It'd be hard, wouldn't it? Class B's pretty united. They won't crumble under outside pressure. Bribery won't work against Ichinose. You could launch a frontal attack, but even if our own class cooperated, it's doubtful we'd win."

"Indeed. At first glance, it appears that conquering Ichinose-san would prove a difficult task."

"At first glance? You mean, that's not the case?"

“No. Everyone has a weakness, even Ichinose-san. An Achilles heel,” Sakayanagi laughed. “The fact that she’s a model student, which you both acknowledge, is undeniable. However, can you say with certainty that her caring, good-natured temperament reflects her true self? Don’t you think there’s another side to her? That she looks down upon others, deep in her heart?”

“I dunno. I think most people are like that, at least a little. They may say nice things, but we really have no idea what’s going on in their heads. That’s not necessarily a bad thing, though. It’s perfectly reasonable for someone to act in their own self-interest. But I do think that Ichinose might be genuinely good-natured,” Kamuro reasoned.

She was right; we all had a secret self. Usually, that hidden personality wasn’t as extreme as Kushida’s, but all humans had a dark side. However, Ichinose Honami seemed to have no secret mean streak.

“You don’t think she looks down upon others?” Sakayanagi continued.

“No. She’s extremely kind—nice without rubbing it in your face.”

“So, you’re saying that she’s stupidly good-natured?”

“Yes. Exactly.”

Sakayanagi smiled. “In that case, you and Ichinose-san are very similar—aren’t you, Masumi-san?”

“Huh? Whaddya mean? We’re totally different. Are you being sarcastic or something?”

“Not at all. You might be surprised by this assessment, but you and Ichinose-san are remarkably alike.” Kamuro seemed exasperated, but Sakayanagi continued. “I mean that Ichinose has the same problem you do, Masumi-san.”

“The same problem? What?” asked Kamuro.

Sakayanagi looked at me, seemingly to check whether I’d caught on. Having no idea what she was talking about, I shook my head.

“Don’t you understand? Your secret, the one in my keeping, is the same as hers. Well, the problems are the same, but they played out to different ends,” Sakayanagi said.

Kamuro looked as if she understood. “So, you’re saying that Ichinose did the same thing I did?” She sounded shocked.

“Surely such an occurrence isn’t that uncommon,” said Sakayanagi.

“Did Ichinose tell you that? Do you know for sure?” asked Kamuro. She was normally calm and composed, but this clearly shook her.

“Naturally. She told me about it in detail, in fact. She opened her secret heart to me. I merely performed a cold reading,” said Sakayanagi.

“Cold reading” was a conversational technique by which someone extracted information through careful observation and leading questions. Perhaps Sakayanagi had gathered data beforehand and gone in prepared.

“Human beings lie to make themselves look better. You and Ichinose-san are just the tip of the iceberg. People really are interesting creatures. No matter how exceptional they are, they slip up so easily.” Sakayanagi gazed pointedly at me. “I’m afraid those are all the hints I can give you right now regarding Ichinose-san. I intend to thoroughly crush her. Hopefully, you can figure out why.”

Sakayanagi seemed to want me to compete with her, but sadly, I wasn’t interested. She could rampage as much as she pleased.

“Well then, shall we be going, Masumi-san?” They started walking away. I left as well, passing them. As I did, Sakayanagi spoke once more. “You didn’t say anything, Masumi-san.”

“Huh? About what?”

“You saw Ayanokouji-kun and I speaking together. We were discussing strategies. Even so, you asked no questions. Normally, you’d barrage me with queries, but…”

“Wh-what are you talking about? I’m not interested, that’s all.”

“Is that so? You tend to blather on about anything you notice. Yet this time, you’re incurious. I wonder why that is?” Kamuro didn’t answer. Sakayanagi continued. “Could it be that you already possess information about Ayanokouji-kun? If so, I wonder where you obtained it. Is it possible you two had a meeting of which I’m unaware?”

Like a bloodhound following a scent, Sakayanagi looked sharply at me. I neither spoke nor made eye contact. If she had a problem, let it be with Kamuro. “Heh,” she laughed. “Well, since I’m in quite a good mood today, I won’t press it further. Have a wonderful day, Ayanokouji-

kun.”

With that, Sakayanagi left with Kamuro in tow. Kamuro sure had it tough, being used like a pawn by Sakayanagi even during winter vacation. Whatever Sakayanagi had on her was probably bad. Maybe it *was* for the best that we’d had this conversation. The part about Ichinose and Kamuro having the same problem, in particular, interested me.

Sakayanagi would get nothing out of lying to me, but I similarly gained nothing by taking what she said at face value. If the truth got out, and Ichinose did fall from grace, well, that’d be fine.

“Should I at least tell Horikita about this now? Hmm.”

Horikita was currently allying herself with Ichinose, and might back the girl. Personally, I thought it’d be better to just leave things alone. But the class leader got to call the shots, and that was currently Horikita. Maybe I’d contact her.

Later. This wasn’t urgent. With Sakayanagi gone, I strolled to the dorm. I was back on track to fulfill my original goal—delivering the items I’d purchased.

However, my objective was once again derailed.

As I approached Keyaki Mall’s exit, I passed a rather energetic-looking girl. She didn’t notice me, since she seemed to be in a hurry. She was almost running. She went into a store to join up with her friend, then disappeared. After watching her, I decided to forego heading back to the dormitory.

“Guess I’ll go see a movie,” I said.

3.1

I WENT TO THE MOVIES fairly often on my days off. Some people might've considered spending points on a film to be a waste of money, but I thought it was important to have a variety of interests, and films were becoming something of a hobby of late. In addition to being a way to relax, they let me acquire new knowledge, exposing me to different ideas, cultures, and points of view.

That said, the movie I saw today wasn't award-winning cinema. Nor was it the type of saccharine love story couples flocked to over the holidays. I was watching an action story with gunfights, focusing on a conflict between small-town gangsters.

Some days, I just wanted to turn my brain off and be entertained.

Since the film was about to leave theaters after a short run, it was by no means a masterpiece. It was a pathetic B movie at best. Thus, I'd been able to book a ticket online and get a good seat for any time I wanted. Still, I kept hesitating over whether I was actually going to go watch it. In the end, I decided to go anyway, since I was already out for another reason.

I went to the counter, where I chose which movie I was going to see and the showtime I wanted. I received a laminated sheet with a seating chart on it. I realized then that something was wrong. The seats toward the back of the auditorium, the ones I always chose when I went to the movies, were already full. In fact, there didn't seem to be many free seats left.

Apparently, a popular film scheduled at the same time had been postponed, so a lot of people had decided to see this gangster movie. With Christmas approaching, most of the seats had been reserved in pairs. People probably thought, *Well, better to watch something, rather than nothing.* Or something like that.

I told the employee that the exact center of the front row would be good. Fortunately, a few seats were still available. Why were the seats at the ends of rows so popular? Did it have anything to do with couples? I didn't really know the specific psychology of movie theaters.

Since I had about twenty minutes until the movie started, I killed

time by hanging around a rack of pamphlets. With ten minutes to go, I entered the auditorium alone. Couples sparsely filled the seats behind me. In the center of the front row, I waited for the movie to begin.

The seats filled up relatively early. I kept looking at the screen. I quite enjoyed watching the previews, seeing what movies were coming soon to theaters. That was why I always made sure to sit down before the previews started. Watching them on the big screen excited me in a way the previews didn't at home, in front of the TV.

The auditorium lights were still on as a commercial advertising a convenience store played onscreen. I watched scenes of someone stirring soft, plump rice with a spoon, then lightly toasting *nori* on a net, until finally, children ate the finished *onigiri*.

As it got close to showtime, and the seats gradually filled up, I looked around. My row was mostly full now. There were couples to the right and left of me, leaving one seat open. Both couples were taking advantage of the theater's dim lighting to hold hands. I guess couples went to see action movies too.

Since the seat directly to my left was still open, it'd probably remain empty. I mean, who else would do something like seeing a movie all alone on Christmas Eve? I put my phone on Do Not Disturb mode, then, to be extra cautious, turned it off.

As I did, the lights dimmed, and the previews played. *This is where the fun begins.* Just then, a shadow appeared on my left. A lone student sat down in the vacant seat.

So, another odd person. Someone who'd see a movie all alone on Christmas Eve. Honestly, I admired their taste in movies. I turned to look at my fellow cinephile.

"……"

My mouth fell open. The lone wolf was none other than Class C's Ibuki Mio. The incident on the rooftop popped into my head, and I felt awkward. Fortunately, the auditorium was dark; Ibuki didn't notice me. Her eyes focused only on the screen.

I was a firm believer in staying all the way to the end of the credits, but if I lingered until then, the lights would come back up. That settled it. Today, I'd make my escape as soon as the credits rolled.

However, I'd miscalculated. It was the problem that came up time

and time again in movie theaters: the armrest.

If I were sitting at the end of the row, I definitely could've used both the left and right armrests, but other seats were a constant battle. As far as movie theater etiquette went, there was no official rule, but the early bird got the worm, so to speak. Since the couple to my right had already made use of the armrest, I'd thought the one to my left would be open. However, Ibuki casually placed her elbow on it. There was enough space on the armrest for two people, but then our arms would touch.

Maybe Ibuki thought about the same thing, because she looked to see who was sitting next to her. Naturally, our eyes met.

"Geh!" She gave a disgusted grunt. The previews were silent at just that moment, so I heard it quite clearly.

I thought that saying nothing would be weird, so responded with something simple. "What a coincidence, huh?"

Ibuki just looked away. She intended to ignore me, apparently. Well, that helped make things easier. I concentrated on the screen.

When the movie started, however, I felt Ibuki gaze over at me on occasion. Maybe she was just curious about my presence, but she didn't seem focused on the movie. I wanted to turn to her and say something like, "How about you watch the screen instead of me?" I couldn't speak loudly in the auditorium, though. *Should I try whispering it into her ear? No, she might snap at me. I should just watch the movie, pretend not to notice, and put up with her.* Fortunately, I'd been used to people monitoring me since childhood.

I wouldn't let myself look agitated. I'd just watch the movie.

However, the film itself wasn't particularly good—truly a B movie. *Seriously, the plot's so repetitive and dull. Shouldn't it try something different?* Well, at least we were nearing the climax, with the protagonist about to ride into enemy territory and save the day.

Just before that thrilling edge-of-your-seat conclusion, though, the screen suddenly went black. At first, I thought it was an artistic decision on the filmmaker's part. We all remained silent and kept watching. However, after ten or twenty seconds, neither the picture nor the sound had come back.

Just as I started to wonder what was up, an announcement came over the auditorium speakers. *"We sincerely apologize for the delay. The screening has been temporarily halted due to an equipment malfunction. We understand that this may be an inconvenience. Please bear with us until the problem has been addressed."*

The students grumbled and complained at first, then settled down to chat quietly and wait.

"Jeez. I really have no luck at all." Ibuki sighed, seemingly directing her comment at me. Did she mean to imply that I'd caused the malfunction?

"I'm pretty shocked, too. I mean, I never imagined you'd come see a movie today," I replied.

"I'm free to decide when I see a movie, aren't I?" she retorted.

Guess she didn't like what I suggested. "Well, the same goes for me," I said.

"You—" Ibuki opened her mouth to speak, but stammered. She glared before speaking again. "All this time, you've made fun of me. I can't forgive you for that."

I understood why Ibuki might be angry. Consoling her, or saying that that wasn't true, wouldn't work. I adopted the strategy that I thought was best. "That's power, Ibuki."

"Huh?" A disquieting air hung around us. She gave me a sharp glare full of irritation and bloodthirst.

I continued speaking. "If you have enough power to overcome your opponent, you win. Whether your opponent hid the true extent of their abilities doesn't change that. If you could've stopped me, Ryuuen would've won. Or, at the very least, we could've ended in a draw."

I would've looked extremely lame if I'd been beaten up on that rooftop after taunting Ibuki.

"That's…" Ibuki definitely couldn't argue. One should rely on one's own strength. Whether an opponent hid their abilities should've been a non-issue.

"Besides, unlike Ryuuen and Sakayanagi, I'm not aiming for the upper classes," I continued. "Naturally, since I don't want to stand out, I don't make it a point to show off what I can do. I only fought Ryuuen after weighing many other options. There was no getting around it. It's never been my intention to mock or condescend to my opponents."

"I really don't like that." No matter how logical my argument, it was difficult for Ibuki to accept. "You say you don't want to stand out, but that's bullshit. If you hadn't done what you did back on the island and provoked Ryuuen, things wouldn't've turned out this way. Even before that, if you let the whole thing with Sudou slide, that would've been it."

"You may be right." If I'd let Sudou get expelled, Ibuki defeat Class D on the island, and Ryuuen game the cruise ship's test, then Ryuuen wouldn't have had it out for Class D the way he did. He probably would've turned his sights on Class B long ago.

"You say one thing, then do another," Ibuki accused. "You used your abilities even as you stayed hidden."

She turned back to the blank screen, probably figuring that any further conversation would be a waste of time. I decided to let things go. With any luck, the movie would resume soon, and this encounter would come to an end.

3.2

HOWEVER, MY PLAN to leave as soon as the credits rolled went up in smoke. I waited and waited, but the movie didn't start. Either the equipment malfunction was just that severe, or the workers were slow.

Ibuki sighed repeatedly. Well, it was perfectly reasonable to sigh in this situation. I'd already started to lose interest in the movie.

"So, what do you think's going to happen?" I asked.

I couldn't take the silence anymore. Since Ibuki still hadn't left, she was probably curious about the end of the movie. Or maybe, since no one else was moving, she couldn't get to the exit without crawling over everyone.

Ibuki rested her cheek on her fist, her arm placed firmly on the armrest. She made no attempt to look in my direction. Her body language screamed, "You're annoying, so don't talk to me!"

Maybe I should quit poking the beehive. When in the world was the movie going to start?

A few students here and there grew tired of waiting and left. I thought Ibuki would follow, but she showed no sign of getting up. Maybe she simply wanted to see the rest of the movie after all.

For my part, I wanted to see how it ended. If I didn't stick around, then coming here would've been meaningless. *Time to display my tenacity.*

I turned my phone on and checked the time. About twenty minutes had passed since the movie stopped. The equipment malfunction was going to impact not just this screening, but the next one as well. Looking around, I saw that the number of people remaining had dwindled. Only a few audience members stayed, including Ibuki and me.

People who came alone to the movie might stick it out, but couples probably didn't want to waste their time in here. *Guess they left before the amorous mood died.*

"You aren't heading back?" asked Ibuki as I stared at my phone. Her face was turned away, and I couldn't see her expression.

“I’ve already watched 80 percent of the movie. I’m honestly curious about how it ends. Since we’ve been waiting twenty minutes now, it should be back up anytime.”

“If you’re that curious, you could just look it up online,” she replied.

“I don’t really feel like reading someone else’s opinion,” I answered.

I used reviews as a guide to determine whether I wanted to watch a movie, not as a means of evaluating it. Besides, if reading one or two lines explaining the ending was enough to satisfy you, why would you go to a movie in the first place?

“I don’t care about this movie anymore. I just don’t want to leave before you do,” she said.

“You’re very blunt.” Ibuki wasn’t going to win this game of chicken. I had no intention of getting up until the movie ended. That was an advantage a guy who had no Christmas Eve plans possessed.

A sad announcement definitively ended the battle. The faulty equipment couldn’t be fixed, so they’d decided to cancel the screening. The staff explained how refunds would be processed.

“I really have no luck,” Ibuki sighed.

If I wanted to know what happened, I’d have to either wait until the movie was available to rent, or read spoilers online.

Even though the movie was canceled, Ibuki showed no sign of moving. I decided to just get up and leave. My business here was done.

3.3

MAYBE BECAUSE OF THE TENSION I'd endured, my shoulders felt stiff. After unsettling interactions with Sakayanagi and Ibuki, I didn't feel like taking any detours on my way back.

As I left the theater, a voice called out to me from behind. "Hey. Do you really think you can just go on hiding your identity like this?" It was Ibuki. She'd chased after me to ask that?

"Did you not listen to a word I said? Just keep what happened to yourself," I told her.

"This isn't a joke. All this time, you've been laughing at me," she replied. She didn't need to repeat that she couldn't forgive me. It was written on her face.

"Well, what're you going to do about it? Spread the word about me?" I asked.

"No. After all, I wouldn't be the only one in trouble if I did. Right?"

"That's right. Depending how things played out, it wouldn't just affect the people who were on the rooftop. Manabe and her friends might get caught in the crossfire."

If school officials followed the series of events all the way back, they might trace things to me. However, I could come up with as many excuses as I needed to give them the runaround. The most they could possibly do was suspend me.

"Besides, this school's built on student conflict. You're barking up the wrong tree by blaming me," I told Ibuki.

"I know that. It's just, well…I can't stand you."

I contemplated Ibuki Mio. She'd probably studied martial arts since childhood. There was hardly any difference in strength between male and female bodies before adolescence, so with her skill, it would've been easy to overpower the opposite sex.

With time and puberty, though, things got more complicated. You could categorize Ibuki as fairly strong for an average high-school

student. There was no way a man without martial arts training could contend with her. But against a man with the same talent, one who'd trained at the same level or higher, she couldn't win.

Ibuki wasn't ready to acknowledge that.

"You went quiet. What're you thinking about?" she asked.

"I was contemplating how I can resolve this matter amicably."

"And?"

"Unfortunately, I couldn't come up with anything. No matter what I said, nothing would convince you."

For the first time today, the corners of Ibuki's mouth twitched into a small smile. "You're right. I won't back down."

As I'd suspected, I might need to employ an all-out attack. "So, do you like movies?" I asked.

"Huh?" I understood why she looked stunned by the non sequitur.

However, I daringly continued a normal conversation. "I mean, you'd go see a movie alone. And an obscure one at that."

"So? That's my goal."

What an odd response. "Goal?"

"To see every movie they screen at this school. It's not a big deal."

That was surprising. Everyone at this school had goals—to make friends, to go out on days off, to graduate without being marked late or absent even once, to always place first on tests. Ibuki's "see every movie" goal might've seemed simple by comparison, but it was actually difficult to achieve. Going to a movie you wanted to see was easy, but sitting through something that didn't interest you was tiresome. Most people probably would've considered such a goal frivolous. However, establishing a goal and then seeing it through was hugely impressive.

"Are you making fun of me?" Ibuki glared, interpreting my silence as a bad thing.

"Hmm. I wonder." I could've complimented her, but I was afraid to. It'd probably be best if we parted ways before people noticed us "hanging out." "So, what're you up to now? Want to grab some tea?"

"Don't be a jerk. I'm leaving."

I wasn't surprised by the refusal. "Well, if you're headed right, I'll

turn left. Have a nice day."

"Trust me, I don't want to spend a second more with you, either."

Truly, we were a match made in heaven. Ibuki immediately turned right. I went left. However, she was suddenly beside me, yanking my arm.

"Hey. What?" I asked.

"Shut up. Ishizaki and the others are headed this way."

Ibuki dragged me off to a hiding spot, then stealthily observed what was going on. Soon after, Ishizaki, Komiya, and Kondo passed by. Ishizaki was in the group's center. Ryuuen would normally have been with them, but obviously, he wasn't there.

"You okay, Ishizaki? You're still staggerin' around."

As Ishizaki walked, his face twisted into a pained expression. "Shut it. I'm fine, already. Aw—owww!"

Komiya looked around anxiously. "About earlier…did you really get into it with Ryuuen-san? For real?"

"Yeah. Albert and Ibuki were with me too. Ryuuen-san's…no, *Ryuuen's* time is over. From now on, he's done giving orders."

"That's a relief, man. But wait. Who's gonna come up with strategies and stuff?"

"Hell if I know. Kaneda'll probably do it, I guess."

They walked past us while they talked.

"Phew. They didn't see us," said Ibuki. She probably didn't want her classmates to notice the two of us together. Especially not Ishizaki. There was no telling what his reaction would be.

However, Ibuki and I had both overheard what Ishizaki said.

"I got an e-mail from Ishizaki a while ago. He said Ryuuen didn't drop out of school," Ibuki told me.

"That so?"

She drew nearer. "You did something. Ryuuen wouldn't have given up on dropping out otherwise."

"My involvement aside, didn't you try to stop him yourself?" I asked.

It seemed like I hit the nail on the end. “I hate Ryuuen’s guts,” Ibuki replied. “But I hate that you took him down, when you’re not even our classmate. I hate that even more.”

“I beat him precisely because I’m an outsider. Besides, there’re things you can do, as members of Class C, that I can’t. Like how Ishizaki intends to carry out his duty,” I said. Ishizaki might hate Ryuuen, but he was still trying to do his part. I could tell it was because he had a certain amount of respect for the other boy.

“Do you really think so?”

“Do *you*?”

“He should hate it. Ryuuen treated him like shit. Still, even if it took three people to bring him down, Ishizaki’s position in the class has to improve now that Ryuuen’s defeated.”

“I see. I suppose you can look at it that way.” I nodded as though she’d convinced me.

Ibuki lightly kicked the back of my knee. “Thought you’d dodge that.”

“Look. I’m not psychic. I can’t anticipate every attack.”

“So, what’d you think of what Ishizaki said?” she asked. Maybe she didn’t want to be the only one with an opinion.

“Even if Ishizaki says he hates the guy, he still probably respects Ryuuen’s abilities.”

Ishizaki likely recognized the downsides of Ryuuen dropping out. He was playing along with Ryuuen’s cover story about their falling out, at any rate. Ryuuen, meanwhile, seemed to be keeping his promise; he wasn’t telling anyone about me. I hadn’t thought he would, but that was no guarantee. There was always the chance that Ryuuen would change his mind and rat me out. If he decided to talk, even Karuizawa might be in trouble.

“Albert probably won’t say anything, but do you think Ishizaki will stay quiet?” asked Ibuki. She knew what I was thinking.

“If he talks, he talks. I’ll cross that bridge when I come to it.”

“I see.”

As Ibuki saw that I wasn’t rattled, her interest seemed to fade. Since Ishizaki and the others had left, I decided to finally break away. I

crouched as Ibuki came at my head with a high-speed kick.

"So much for not being able to dodge," she said.

"Because that was a frontal attack. Plus, you just kicked with all your strength, didn't you?" A roundhouse kick from an experienced martial artist could've given me a concussion.

"You're so strong, but you won't show it. Why?"

"Do you go around telling everyone how strong you are?" I asked.

"Well…"

"It's true that if you don't display your skills, no one will even know you have them. But, unlike Sudou and Ishizaki, I'm not the hotheaded type."

"Fight me," said Ibuki.

"What?"

"I want you to fight me one more time. Go all out."

She just wouldn't give up. "How did we even get onto this topic?" I asked.

"I hate you. I hate your lying, two-faced bullshit. You show the world a fake personality and keep the real you locked away."

"I see."

For better or worse, guys like Ryuuen and Ishizaki were exactly what they appeared to be. Ibuki was the same. Even when she spied on us during the island test, she'd acted like herself.

"I've always been this apathetic," I said. "But it's pointless to argue, isn't it?"

"Yep. Everything else aside, I won't be satisfied until I pay you back for the rooftop."

Ibuki wouldn't listen. I could run, but it would cause me a lot of grief if she hounded me for the rest of the school year.

Ibuki must've guessed what I was thinking. "You don't want me to cause trouble, do you?" she asked.

She was threatening me. Even if she didn't tell people about me, they'd notice her following me and ask questions.

"If you want me to back down, have another match with me," she

said.

She said “match,” but it sounded like “battle.”

“Wouldn’t you rather throw down in a game of go or shogi?”

“I don’t know how to play.”

Unfortunate. I was good at both those games.

“Let’s settle this,” said Ibuki. She took a fighting stance, right in the middle of the crowded mall. That was how she decided things—in the most direct, black-and-white way possible.

“This won’t change anything,” I told her.

“Hah. You mean, the results will be the same?” Ibuki’s lips curled. A vein bulged slightly in her forehead. The faint smile she wore just a moment ago now seemed like a distant memory.

“Not just the results. Your way of thinking too, Ibuki.” No matter how badly she lost, Ibuki wouldn’t accept defeat. Even pretending to let her win would be like pouring gas on a raging fire.

“So, you don’t accept my challenge?” she asked.

There was no way I’d accept under normal circumstances. Deep down, I really didn’t want to do this, especially when I was so tired. However…

“Are you free now?” I asked.

“Yeah, I guess. I didn’t have any plans besides the movie. Does that mean we’re doing this?” Ibuki apparently hadn’t expected that I’d go along with the fight. She looked quite taken aback. In fact, she stepped away.

“Were you joking?” I asked.

“No, I want this,” she snapped. “Do you accept or not?”

“Suppose we have a match. What should we do about the location?” I asked.

The mall was hardly the best place. That said, anywhere on campus was basically out of the question. Since it was winter vacation, there was no telling who might see us. We could probably take the fight to one of our rooms, but if we were spotted, that could be even worse.

Ibuki understood that too. “Let’s go look.”

“You’re not going to give up on this, huh?”

“Our chance meeting today sealed your fate.” With that dramatic line, Ibuki started walking off. She seemed to want me to follow her.

“What if I run away?” I asked.

“I’ll chase you. And, when I find you, I’ll dropkick you.”

Well—there you had it. I followed her.

“Before we go any further, let me say this. Our first and only goal is finding a place suitable for our fight.” If she couldn’t pick a suitable location, I was done.

“Yeah.”

Ibuki walked briskly through Keyaki Mall, searching for a quiet, isolated spot. She wouldn’t find one easily. Even in abandoned areas, there were security cameras. If students weren’t around, there would be employees. Maybe we could’ve fought at the school building or something, but we couldn’t enter without our uniforms, and changing into those just to fight would be bizarre.

“Why don’t we just give up?” I suggested. “I mean, finding a secure spot here is—”

“Wait a minute,” said Ibuki, looking at a door with a glass window bearing the words *Staff Only*.

An employee pushing a flatbed cart came out that door. He wore a yellow apron. A nametag on his chest read *Kimura* and *Keyaki Mall Pharmacy* in a large font. The cart held three cardboard boxes, and the employee was headed toward the mall pharmacy, most likely restocking supplies.

“Follow me,” Ibuki said.

“Hey, that’s—”

She opened the door and led us into a deserted warehouse. The space was dimly lit, full of cardboard boxes of snacks, gauze, and the like. The heat wasn’t on, so it was chilly.

“No one will see us.”

There wouldn’t be any security cameras installed here. However, shouldn’t this place have been locked? Did that employee forget to lock up behind him? Or maybe he’d be back soon? In any event, we’d be in trouble if we were discovered.

“We’ll just say we walked in by mistake. We’re not stealing

anything; in fact, we're completely empty-handed," Ibuki said. "This works, yeah?"

"I suppose, but…if a staff member shows up, what then?" I asked.

"We'll just have to settle things before that happens." Ibuki closed the door with a *ka-chunk*.

"What if that guy forgot to lock up? He'll come back and see us."

"No need to panic, is there?"

"Look at the doorknob," I said.

Ibuki frowned. "Hey, wait a minute. Why isn't there a way to unlock it?"

"Some glass-window doors have no thumb-turn lock on the inside. That thumb-turn part is what unlocks them," I replied.

"So, in other words, we're trapped?"

"That would be the case."

"What the hell? Why is it that every time I encounter you, I get trapped? Agh! Just remembering that time in the elevator makes me sick."

"This isn't my fault. You chose the location."

"Huh? So, it's *my* fault?"

Who else deserved the blame? Last time, we were stuck in an elevator in the middle of summer. This time, we were in an unheated warehouse in the middle of winter. What a world.

"The windowpane looks like it's made of ordinary glass," I noted. "We can smash it ourselves."

"So, we can still get out!"

"They'd definitely know we broke in here, though."

"Fine. I'm going to stay positive," said Ibuki.

"I have a bad feeling about this."

"Whatever. This just means no one's going to see us fight." Ibuki slowly reassumed a fighting stance. "You decide the rules. Fight until one of us admits defeat? Or until someone loses consciousness?"

"Until someone admits defeat," I said.

"On second thought, I'll decide the rules," she said.

“Hey.”

“If we do what you want, you’ll just give up and take the loss before we even start.” She was absolutely correct. “We go until a clear, black-and-white winner is decided.”

She was so damn pushy. “Since we’re adding conditions, I have one of my own,” I said.

“What is it?”

“If we settle things here, you can never challenge me again. Okay? If the school makes us fight as part of an exam, that’s different. But this is the very last personal battle we’ll have.”

“Fine by me.”

With that decided, I had no choice but to get in battle mode. I’d honestly thought the rooftop incident would end things, but there was no getting out of this. The real problem, however, would come after I defeated Ibuki. *Let’s finish this*.

“You’re so annoying,” said Ibuki. “You just want to get out of here.”

“This location isn’t ideal.” No one would believe we walked in here by mistake. They’d probably assume we came in to steal things.

There was no time to think, though—Ibuki started launching kicks at me, all the while keeping up a strong defense. *Her fighting style’s mostly focused on footwork, eh?*

Continually dodging kicks inside a cramped space was no simple task, especially since I had to avoid damaging the cardboard boxes at all costs. *Break it, buy it.* Between my personal expenses and the large number of private points I “loaned” to Karuizawa, I really wanted to avoid excess spending.

Just countering Ibuki wouldn’t be enough, though. In fact, she probably wouldn’t admit defeat even if I knocked her out cold. I needed to beat her decisively, but I didn’t want to leave visible bruises, which limited my options. I had to make her admit defeat without injuring her. Not an easy task.

I avoided Ibuki’s kicks, moving as little as possible. Then, I raised my left, nondominant hand. *Slap!* The base of my palm smacked Ibuki’s temple hard.

The fierce sound and pain knocked Ibuki over. “Ah!”

If I’d struck her with a little more force, she probably would’ve lost consciousness. Even if I could knock her out, however, I couldn’t easily knock the will to fight out of her.

“You’re not even taking *this* seriously?” Ibuki held her forehead and glared at me.

“If you’re an experienced martial artist, you should understand what I’m doing,” I said.

“I do understand. I don’t need it pointed out to me. But…some things I just can’t accept.”

Ibuki let out a cry and unleashed another kick. She left herself wide open in the process, focused on pumping as much power into the attack as possible. She might’ve been going for a decisive one-hit knockout—or maybe she hoped we’d end up hitting each other, and was preparing to counter?

Either way, I had no intention of taking the attack. With my right arm, I guarded against Ibuki’s repeated kicks. I used my left hand to grab her throat.

“Gah!”

Ibuki couldn’t breathe properly. She used both hands to grasp at my left arm, frantically struggling. She dug her nails into my flesh, but I didn’t relax my grip on her throat.

“Decide, Ibuki. Do you want to stop? Or do we have to continue this pointless farce? If you choose to fight, you might very well die,” I told her.

If Ibuki could’ve been moved by mere words, we wouldn’t have been here right now. However, it was worth a try.

“Ryuuen showed me what he had. How about you, Ibuki? Can you show me that?”

“Guh!” Ibuki glared at me with pure hatred, but her hands shook. She weakly tapped my arm three times, her eyes drifting closed.

I understood and gently loosened my grip, releasing her.

Ibuki huffed. “I didn’t think you’d go easy on me just because I’m female, but you really were merciless.”

“Well, you’re not an opponent I can hold back against.” If I’d gone

easy on her, she would've grown even angrier. It was true that I'd scarcely tried, but that was another matter. The important thing was that I didn't seem like I held back.

"Ah, come on. Why?" sighed Ibuki. Frustrated, she sat down. "Fine. You win."

I didn't care about winning or losing. If Ibuki was convinced now, that was enough for me. We'd both gotten what we needed from this fight.

"You're the strongest person I've ever seen. Stronger than any adult. How'd you get that strong?" she asked.

"Daily training. Obvious to anyone who understands martial arts, right?"

"Yeah." Ibuki sighed in exasperation, giving up. "Okay, so now, how do we get out of here?"

"It's simple." I looked up the Keyaki Mall Pharmacy's phone number and called them. "Excuse me. Is a clerk named Kimura-san available? Would you mind putting him on the phone?"

Shortly afterward, Kimura answered. I let him know that we were stuck.

"Won't this be a problem?" asked Ibuki.

"We'll probably incur some kind of penalty. Play along so we can wrap this up quick."

Soon afterward, the staff member who'd locked the door earlier entered the warehouse. Spotting us, he asked why we came inside, and why we didn't contact anyone sooner.

"Sorry. I just got a little too excited. We were on a date and looking for an isolated spot. I didn't even notice," I said, playing the part of half an idiotic couple on a romantic Christmas outing. Of course, I didn't go so far as to explicitly call us a couple. "Right, Mio? You should apologize, too."

"H-huh? What're you—"

Ibuki jolted when I called her by her first name, but quickly understood what was up. I'd considered the small chance that she might betray me, and prepared accordingly. This way, she couldn't tattle on me without incriminating herself in the process.

“I’m really sorry.” Even though she seemed annoyed, Ibuki lowered her head in apology.

Going with the flow, I swore that we hadn’t touched anything. Kimura-san just kept grilling us, but eventually said he wouldn’t report the incident. After all, it made him look bad too. That was why I’d called for the specific person who forgot to lock the door.

Once Kimura was done lecturing us, we quickly escaped, and he locked the door and returned to work.

“We made it,” I said.

“You memorized that clerk’s name in the second we passed him?” Ibuki was apparently more interested in that than in the fact that I’d called her by her first name earlier.

“It just happened to enter my field of view.”

“I see.” Her voice was cold. “In any case, I won’t fight you again.”

“Thank you.”

“But I want your opinion.”

“My opinion?”

“You know that a student needs twenty million points to get to Class A, right? For an entire class to do so, they need a combined total of eight hundred million points. Do you think it’s even possible to save such an absurd number?” she asked.

“It’s impossible. Everyone dreams about it, but they have to face reality in the end,” I replied.

“You’re probably right.”

“Is that the last thing you wanted to ask?”

“Yes, that’s all. Bye.” She quietly walked away.

And so, I severed my ties with Ibuki. At least, I hoped so. We’d spend three years at this school, though. I was sure we’d face off again before we graduated.

3.4

"TODAY'S BEEN A DISASTER."

After having my plans derailed multiple times, I was finally on the way back to my dorm. Going out during winter vacation was clearly a dangerous activity.

When I checked the time, I saw that it was almost three in the afternoon. As I walked through Keyaki Mall, I noticed three girls slightly ahead of me, all Class D students: Satou, Shinohara, and Matsushita. They were having a friendly chat as they walked.

Since I already had plans to meet Satou the day after tomorrow, my gaze went to her. I made sure the three girls wouldn't notice me, but stayed close enough to hear their conversation. If I picked up any useful information, the day wouldn't be a total wash.

"Well, we weren't able to get ourselves boyfriends before Christmas, huh?" said Matsushita, looking at all the couples.

"You complain, but you could easily get one right away. You're so cute," said Shinohara, poking Matsushita with a playful grin.

"I'm not willing to settle."

"Yeah, I guess not. But, you know, I really do want a boyfriend."

"Well, do you have any candidates in mind?" asked Matsushita.

Shinohara crossed her arms. "Not a single one. Our class's a catastrophe."

"Karuizawa-san's already claimed the only real prize." Of course, she was talking about Hirata.

"Since we've done nothing but fight with the other classes, we haven't had any free time to make friends. Maybe it's better to try going out with the seniors, you know? Though a university student would be even better," said Matsushita. Dating anyone in the same year was apparently out of the question.

"The seniors, huh? I guess I kinda think the opposite. If we're talking romance, I'd prefer someone my age," replied Shinohara.

"What about you, Satou-san?"

“Huh? Me? Oh, well…I guess I’d prefer a classmate, like Shinohara-san.”

“No, no,” corrected Shinohara. “I never said anything about *classmates*.” So, the same grade level was fine; Class D was not.

“Speaking of which, Satou-san, haven’t you been talking with Ayanokouji-kun?”

Uh, maybe I should make myself scarce. I turned around and quickly abandoned pursuit. Putting more distance between the girls and myself, I decided to kill time at the bookstore. I stared at a magazine that ranked everything from school supplies to home appliances. It answered important questions like which detergent brand was best.

“Rankings for trendy goods. Exciting.” Since the magazine was clearly so interesting, I looked through it. “Maybe I should buy it and just head back to the dorm,” I muttered.

The section on the best car accessories didn’t address my current needs, but since it was a bonus, I accepted it. Maybe I could use the magazine as a reference guide for buying appliances.

Okay, Satou and the other girls had to have left by now. Relieved, I looked around; however, I could see Shinohara standing there alone. The other two must’ve gone to the restroom or something. *Guess I’ll have to look at some more books.*

There were quite a few customers in the bookstore, but I instantly spotted someone who didn’t quite fit in—who radiated bad intentions. Ryuuen Kakeru.

He was looking at academic books. With his back turned, I couldn’t see his expression. Without his cronies around, he seemed kind of lonely. It was impressive that he was up and about after the beating I’d given him just the other day, but maybe I should’ve expected that.

Even if Ryuuen noticed me, we didn’t exactly have a friendly relationship. I decided not to approach him.

As I continued to browse the shelves, I heard Shinohara. She sounded bewildered. I looked up and saw a guy and girl, probably seniors, glaring at her. “Hey. You’re a first-year, aren’t you?”

“Eh?”

“Were you staring at us right now?”

“N-no, I wasn’t. I’d never…”

I didn’t recognize the senior girl, but the guy was familiar. He was the third-year Class D student who sold me old test answers at the start of the year. Quite a few second- and third-year students had gotten expelled since then, but though he’d been just scraping by—living off vegetable meal sets—he was still here.

The two upperclassmen wore gaudy matching polka-dot outfits, clearly broadcasting “couple” vibes. Their arms almost touched. No doubt they were an item.

“You were totally staring,” the senior girl told Shinohara. “What, can’t face forward when you’re walking?”

“Come on, let’s just go already. Don’t mind her,” said the guy.

His girlfriend seemed pretty angry, though. “You’re just a first year. And you’re a Class D student too, aren’t you?”

“Well, um, yes. But…but I wasn’t staring.”

“Don’t lie to me. You’re the one who bumped into us!” I was willing to bet she and Shinohara had shoulder-checked each other accidentally. Since neither seemed to have any injuries, it couldn’t have hurt that much. “You should do something about that attitude. Bumping into a senior? Apologize.”

“B-but you’re the one who wasn’t paying attention, so—”

“Huh? Are you saying it’s my fault?”

Shinohara tried, but she couldn’t take the pressure. She reluctantly bowed her head. “N-no. I’m really sorry.”

However, that wasn’t enough for the senior. Her fuse was lit, and she was ready to explode. “Hmph. With an attitude like that, the apology means nothing.”

“A-attitude? But you weren’t looking ahead, Senpai.”

“Don’t screw with me! You were the one being a space case.”

“But—”

Maybe I should’ve lent a helping hand. But I hadn’t seen them bump into each other, so it wasn’t like I could stand witness. As I mulled it over, ready to put back the magazine I held, another student appeared. He noticed Shinohara and approached her. I continued to watch.

“Hey. What’re ya doing, Shinohara?” asked Ike Kanji, ignoring the seniors.

“Ah…Ike-kun. Um…” From the expression on Shinohara’s face, she seemed caught between two brewing storms. Ike brought trouble wherever he went, so that was a perfectly understandable reaction.

“Who are you? Piss off,” snapped the senior girl.

“Uh, sorry, Senpai. But, hey, this girl’s my classmate. Did she do something?” Judging from Ike’s tone, he seemed to have a grasp on the situation.

“Did she do something? She crashed into us. On top of that, she got all huffy and mean and kept glaring at us.”

“Ah, I get it. She glares at me, too,” Ike laughed. Shinohara looked dumbstruck. “But, hey, her face just *looks* like she’s always glaring, y’know? She wouldn’t have the guts to actually glare at an upperclassman. She’s just got resting bitch face or something,” said Ike. “At any rate, we better not cause a ruckus. A teacher was just here.” He directed his comments to the guy, not the girl.

It appeared to be an effective strategy. “Let’s go,” said the third-year boy.

The senior girl still looked dissatisfied, but her anger apparently faded. “Hmph!” she said, and strode ahead with her boyfriend.

After the two upperclassmen left, Shinohara let out a sigh of relief. “Thanks,” she said.

You’d think that Ike would’ve been overjoyed to have a girl thank him, but he acted surprisingly cool. “No need to thank me. Not a big deal.”

“Still, that stuff you said was *not* okay. It’s not like I’m always glaring at people or something. My face isn’t like that.”

“I just said that to help you.”

“Couldn’t you think of a better way?”

“Well, no.”

“Well, um…th-thank—”

“Y-yeah. See ya. Hey, enjoy your Christmas without a boyfriend!” Ike taunted.

“Huh?! You wouldn’t be able to get a girlfriend if you spent ten thousand years trying!” Shinohara snapped back.

For some reason, Ike had given Shinohara a mean comment as a parting gift—maybe because Satou and Matsushita were coming back from the restroom. Upon meeting back up with Shinohara, the girls looked suspicious.

“Hey, was that Ike-kun? What happened?” asked Satou.

“Was he messing with you again? Ugh. Why’s our class full of idiots?” asked Matsushita.

“N-no, that’s not what happened. Not really.” I thought Shinohara would vent her anger upon their return, but she didn’t even try to bring up what’d happened. Instead, she quietly turned and watched Ike leave.

Well. I decided to head back too. It didn’t seem like I’d pick up information on Satou here.

3.5

ON THE WAY TO MY DORM, carrying the bag containing the magazine I'd bought, I received a call. The caller ID said Hasebe Haruka. I answered.

"Hey, it's me," said Haruka. "This might be sudden, but how about we all get together the day after tomorrow and par-tay?"

"Hmm? Get together and do what?" I asked. My schedule for the day after tomorrow was already decided, after all.

"You don't know what par-tay means? Par-tay, like 'party.'" Language was bizarre. "Our little get-together's theme would be 'Christmas isn't just for lovers,' or something." Apparently, the holiday's romance had a crippling effect on single people.

I did think it sounded like fun, but had to decline. "Sorry. I already have plans."

"Oh, yeah? The day after tomorrow is Christmas. What do you mean, you have plans?"

If Haruka and the others met up, they might see me. It was probably better just to tell her directly. "I promised I'd hang out with Satou."

"'Satou'? Is that code for sweets or something? Like, you're gonna buy biscotti, put some in your pockets, and walk around?" Haruka was a special kind of idiot. "Whoa, whoa. Wait a minute. Could it be that you're going on a *date*? On Christmas?" She took a minute to get there, but she finally arrived at her destination.

"It's not really a *date*. We're just going to hang out."

"People all around the world would call that a 'date,' though."

Maybe, but I was avoiding the use of the word "date." "We haven't been able to hang out yet, so she asked me to go someplace on the twenty-fifth."

"Uh, that's kinda bad, isn't it?"

Since enrolling at this school, I'd learned a lot about social norms. I understood the significance of a guy and girl going out on Christmas.

But I'd accepted Satou's invitation, and she chose the twenty-fifth. That was it.

"Just checking, but you're not 'going out' or anything, right?" Haruka asked.

"It's the same as that time with Shiina. I'm not dating anyone."

"Well, it's not really my place to say it, but…well, what about Airi?"

"Airi?"

"If you're not hanging with us, Kiyopon, she'll probably wonder why. It's not like you can pretend to be sick. Well, whatever…I'll handle it. Where're you going on your not-date?"

"Does this mean you're going to move your plan around?"

"I've got no choice, right? If Airi sees you and Satou-san on a Christmas date, chances are she'll faint, Kiyopon."

That was probably an exaggeration, but then again, this was Airi we were talking about. It might actually happen. She might even get severely depressed.

I sensed Haruka's demeanor change on the other end of the call. "Haven't you noticed Airi's feelings?" she asked.

We were heading into dangerous territory. "Well, it's obvious that what she feels for me isn't what she feels for most people," I replied.

"Wow. Weird way to put it, but all right. At least you're not *that* dense, I guess. Since you understand, I'm not gonna push you for an answer."

Push me, huh?

The way I saw it, Airi was like a baby bird that'd just begun leaving the nest. At this point in her life, it wasn't surprising that she'd develop feelings for me, since I was one of the few members of the opposite sex she'd grown close to. She needed to mature, however, and get to know lots of other people. By doing so, she could experience emotions like simple friendship before diving into romantic love.

It was the same for me, too. What was school? What were friends? And what did it mean to love someone? I didn't understand those things very well yet, and I couldn't jump into the deep end before I explored the shallows.

“I’ll call you, okay?” said Haruka.

“Sorry I wasn’t available,” I replied.

“Well, our group formed *specifically* to get away from normal friendship rules, right? We hang out when we want to, and when we don’t, we don’t. That’s what makes it fun, ya know?” With that, Haruka hung up.

“That’s certainly true,” I said to no one.

I realized then that I was grateful to be part of such a group.

Chapter 4:
How We Spend Our Time

IT WAS THE TWENTY-FOURTH of December. Christmas Eve.

Today and tomorrow, even busy couples would go out of their way to spend time with one another. To most students, these were still ordinary days, but I was curious about how people would spend them.

I left my room before seven o'clock in the morning. I had separate engagements with two different people—one whom I'd asked to meet, and one who'd invited me out. *Bizarre.*

When I left the dormitory, everything around me had turned completely white. It seemed like a true winter morning.

"Snow sure piles up, huh?" I muttered. Nature was certainly incredible.

The snow fell heavily, but according to the forecast, it was supposed to stop around seven. Even though the temperature was almost the same as it was yesterday, the sight of such heavy snow made me feel colder. *I should probably start wearing gloves and a scarf now.*

Since it was before seven in the morning, most students were still asleep; the campus was empty as I approached a bench near Keyaki Mall. Clearing off some snow, I sat. Soon, a man appeared.

"It's rude to ask somebody to come out so early in the mornin'," he spat.

Ryuuen Kakeru, Class C's leader—no, its former leader—glared sharply at me.

"I needed to meet you when I was sure no one else would be around."

"That's your problem. It's got nothin' to do with me." True. I had more to lose being seen with Ryuuen than he did with me. "So, what do you need?"

"I thought we could make small talk."

"Hah. That's a real funny joke for a real shitty morning."

"Come to think of it, I saw you yesterday," I said. "Plus Ishizaki

and some other guys.”

“What, are you happy you stopped me from dropping out?”

“I’m impressed. Even though you’re all alone, you’re not hiding in your room and sulking.”

“I do whatever I want, wherever I want. Does it scare you to see me out? After all, you don’t know when I’m gonna take revenge.”

“And after you take revenge, I’ll regret that I didn’t get you expelled?”

Ryuuen kicked snow off the bench, then sat beside me.

“I’d like you to hold off on that, if possible. I’d rather live peacefully. Fighting you again would just be a pain,” I told him.

“Then don’t ask me to meet you! Don’t draw my attention back to you.”

I decided to dispense with the small talk and cut straight to the heart of the matter. If I dragged this out too long, Ryuuen would just get up and leave.

“Regarding what happened on the roof the other day… I wanted to add something to that story,” I said.

“Add something?” Ryuuen sounded wary. Analyzing his defeat wouldn’t be fun for him.

Still, I had to show him the truth he couldn’t face. “If you’d been alone up there, you could’ve stuck it out. You would’ve been able to keep fighting.”

However, Ibuki, Ishizaki, and Albert had been there. Their presence, and the knowledge that they’d share the blame for whatever happened, might’ve hastened Ryuuen’s decision. He surrendered after seeing that possibility down the road, not just because of what happened in the moment.

It was a wise move. Of course, I’d manipulated him into it. But in terms of living up to my expectations, Ryuuen had a great deal of potential after all.

“You really are a piece of work, huh?” Ryuuen snapped. “I’m amazed at how far you’ll go just to screw with people. I thought that was *my* specialty, but you put me outta business.”

“I’m only speaking the truth.”

“I’m guessing that this benefits you in some way, and that’s why you used Ishizaki and the others to stop me from dropping out?”

Hmm. I’d hoped that Ryuuen might catch on by now, but it seemed that wasn’t happening.

“Do you really think you can still make me your puppet?” he demanded.

“Puppet? What do you mean?”

“Don’t play dumb. I’m talking about using me to take down the other classes. Why else would you keep me at this school?”

“You’re a man who enjoys battle, aren’t you?” I asked.

“Even if, for argument’s sake, I crushed Classes A and B—with you around, it’d be meaningless.”

Quite a definitive statement. “What? Did I break you that badly after just one defeat?” I asked.

Anger sparked in Ryuuen’s eyes. “You wanna go? Right here and now?”

“I said too much. Please forgive me.”

If the whole incident on the roof hadn’t happened, Ryuuen probably would’ve punched me out. This guy didn’t know fear.

But he’d learned it since then.

Even so, Ryuuen would likely have fought me right here and now if I pushed him enough. Still, he had to avoid dropping out or being expelled if he was ever going to mature.

“We’ve already settled the score between us,” I said. “I won’t bring up the rooftop anymore after this. I promise this is the last time. So, let’s talk.”

Of course, Ryuuen didn’t believe a word I said. “Talk is pointless. I can’t see what I get outta this. I’m leaving.”

He stood up, looking angry.

“You might get something useful,” I replied, stopping him in his tracks.

Ryuuen sat back down without looking at me. He’d probably risen to draw something out of me. He had no intention of going home empty-handed.

“Interpret this however you like, but don’t you think these simple battles are getting boring?” I asked.

Ryuuen looked annoyed. “Simple battles, huh?”

“Class D beats C, then B, and finally A. Then, Horikita and the rest of us become Class A ourselves,” I said. “It sounds like the formula for a big-budget movie. But we needn’t adhere to such a formulaic structure, right?”

Real life didn’t conform to a narrative. We were free to strike Class A before going for Class B, or even to ally with our enemies, Class

C.

“Interestingly enough, it seems that Class A will attack Class B once the third semester begins. We could take Class A out with a single strike while they’re focused on that,” I told Ryuuen.

He suddenly looked interested. “How credible is this information?”

“I’d say about fifty-fifty.” I had to consider whether Sakayanagi was bluffing. If I read her correctly, though, there was a ninety percent chance she’d told me the truth.

“If your information’s solid, this’d be a good chance. But I thought you Class D folks had a whole non-aggression thing going on with Class B? Striking at Class A is all well and good, but they’d crush Class B in the meantime. Ichinose can’t beat Sakayanagi,” said Ryuuen.

“I don’t care who wins or loses. I don’t plan on getting involved.”

“So, you’re just gonna watch her burn, huh?”

“If Sakayanagi crushes Ichinose, that saves me the effort. It could clear Class D’s path to Class A. Besides, this’s Sakayanagi we’re talking about. It might be time I looked up what kind of infractions the school punishes with expulsion.”

“There’s a lot I don’t like about this. You have no ambition to rise. Don’t you want to stay invisible?” Ryuuen asked.

“I do, but if people around me take their own actions…well, I’m fine with that. I’m not opposed to the idea of us rising to Class A easily,” I told him.

“So, you’re just gonna sit back and observe?”

“I need a problem taken care of. There’s someone rather troublesome in my class.”

“Kikyou, huh?” Ryuuen didn’t even need to think about it. “Yeah, she’s certainly giving you a lot of trouble. The way this school works, having an enemy on the inside’s real bad.”

Kushida was targeting Horikita at the moment, and causing enough problems in the process that she—rather than moving up to Class A—was my primary concern. Since I’d been a bit reckless during the incident on the rooftop, I couldn’t afford to make an enemy of Horikita Manabu, the former student council president. If Horikita

Suzune, his sister, was expelled while he was still at this school, he'd show me no mercy.

I wanted to avoid anything that endangered my school life's tranquility.

"Kikyou contacted me the other day, actually. She was askin' when I'd attack. Unfortunately, I was engrossed in hunting you down, so I didn't respond. Seems she hasn't given up on getting Suzune expelled. She's looking for the opportunity to pounce. Heh. She's quite a girl," said Ryuuen.

"If you'd made good use of Kushida, you could've dealt a heavy blow to my class."

"To Suzune or your class, sure. But Kikyou's way too weak to take down someone like you. You don't care about anything."

True.

"So, what're you planning?" Ryuuen demanded. "You can slow a cancer's growth, but it's not going away till it's excised, y'know? That shit can spread."

And then we'd all die. "I know that."

"Oh? Then let's hear your plan, Ayanokouji. How're you gonna end Kikyou?"

"Do I need to answer that?"

"Whether I help you might depend on your reply." A faint smile appeared on Ryuuen's lips, but maybe his mouth was still tender where I'd hit him, because the smile immediately faded.

It'd gotten colder. Staying outside for too long right now wasn't wise.

"In the third semester, Class D will be promoted to Class C," I said. "However, we'll probably fall back down to D when I get Kushida Kikyou expelled."

"Heh heh. Ha ha ha ha!" Ryuuen howled with laughter despite his pain. "You really are terrifying. You'll sink your class if it means taking down your enemies, huh? I knew you had it in you, Ayanokouji."

"We can help each other with this particular endeavor without formally establishing an alliance, don't you agree?"

"Heh. This talk about getting rid of Kikyou tickles me. But going

along with your bullshit and recklessly attacking Class A? Different story."

"It could work, though."

"Save it. If I'm going to throw down, I'd rather target you." Some of Ryuuen's vigor had returned, judging by his heated gaze. Even after learning fear, his eyes still had that sharp gleam. "It seems like you plan on using me, Ayanokouji. But I have no intention of being used."

"Seems that way." Ryuuen appeared ready to disappear from center stage. Maybe he had plans to enact in the wings. "Let me give you a piece of advice," I said. "Your plan with the private points—it's not a bad strategy, but it's flawed. Even if one or two people make it, taking the entire class with you is impossible."

"Ibuki spilled the beans, huh?"

"She didn't spill anything. She just asked me whether it was possible to save eight hundred million points."

That was likely Ryuuen's strategy. Never in this school's history had it worked. I initially thought he was only saving enough points to buy his own way to Class A, or perhaps to promote himself and those closest to him. He'd surrendered his private points on the rooftop because he'd meant to drop out. I would've expected him to go underground and collect private points again if he planned to stay in school.

However, judging from what Ibuki said, Ryuuen was trying to find a way for his entire class to win. To be a tyrant, you had to provide your followers with some acceptable quid pro quo.

Of course, he could just as easily renege on a promise. "Perhaps you were only pretending to save eight hundred million points?" I asked.

If he'd deceived Ibuki, too, this conversation was over.

"Even if you exhausted the points you have now, the contract with Class A's still in place," I continued. "If you bring in eight hundred thousand points per month, you'll need twenty-five months to reach your goal. You'd just barely make it before graduation. If you factor in the private points you need to use every month, you'll squeak past."

Of course, that was based on the assumption that Class A wouldn't collapse in the interim, and that Ryuuen could avoid unnecessary

expenditures.

“You’re certainly a clever guy, Ayanokouji, but you’re far from perfect.” Ryuuen wasn’t joking. He sounded like he was mocking me, but not like he was bluffing.

“So, you have some secret plan to save your entire class, Ryuuen?”

“Listen. An enormous amount of private points move around in a year. There are a hundred and sixty people per grade, if we assume no expulsions. If we add all three grades together, that’s four hundred and eighty students. If I can squeeze a hundred thousand points out of every student per month, that alone gives me forty-eight million points. If I get two hundred thousand points or more a month, I can snag up to one hundred million.”

After just eight months, he’d save about eight hundred million. But even if those calculations checked out in theory, they wouldn’t work in practice. The school would probably strengthen its surveillance if it noticed massive numbers of private points moving around, for instance. If they caught Ryuuen in the act, they’d immediately reclaim those points and hit him with a penalty.

I did the math in my mind with a mental abacus.

Assuming that Class C’s cooperation was a given, and assuming that Ryuuen got the highest possible level of points—one thousand points per month—that made about fifty million points in a year. Doing well at the special exams might net an extra ten million points or so. That averaged out to sixty million points a year, not even two hundred million.

I stared at Ryuuen as I thought. “You can’t reach that number. Or can you?” What strategy did he have in mind? What couldn’t I see?

“You and I have similar methods, but fundamentally different thought processes,” he replied.

“My policy is to avoid choices with low probabilities of success,” I told him.

“Of course. But you can see it, can’t you? The strategy?”

“Yeah. Originally, I thought you had a zero-percent chance of success. Now, I’d estimate five percent or higher.” However, to pull it off, a few things were absolutely essential.

“Anyway, Ayanokouji…why’re you covered in snow?” Ryuuen

brought my focus back to my physical appearance.

“Ah. It just…happened. The sensation of snow is quite refreshing. Is that weird?”

I’d remained still during the snowfall, allowing it to blanket my head and shoulders. I was grateful that Ryuuen pointed it out, but I didn’t brush it off. It’d melt on its own soon enough.

“You really are an odd one,” said Ryuuen.

“Well, now that you’ve heard my pitch, I think we might work together,” I told him.

“It sounds too good to be true. Something stinks,” Ryuuen retorted. “You’d get rid of anyone, even your allies, without hesitation. How can we work together when we’re thinking about stabbing each other in the back?”

“If you’re afraid of someone outsmarting you, then you simply have to outsmart them first. That’s all there is to it, Ryuuen.” I wasn’t looking to make a friend. Ryuuen and I merely had shared interests. In some sense, that was the perfect basis for a relationship.

“In that case, Ayanokouji, I’ll lay the groundwork.”

“Lay the groundwork?”

“Next semester, Kaneda and Hiyori will probably lead Class C… no, Class *D*. I’ll let them know that it’s in our best interest to attack Class A instead of you guys,” said Ryuuen.

“That doesn’t sound like a bad idea.” If Kaneda and Hiyori *did* decide to attack us, though, it’d be a hassle. Ishizaki and Ibuki, in particular, disliked me. They might try to influence their class to challenge mine.

“However, my help comes with a price. If you give me what I want when you guys move up to Class A, we can work together.”

“So, you’ll be pulling Shiina’s strings behind the scenes as well?” I asked.

“Impossible. I already told ’em I’d step down.”

“You want a lot for a small favor.”

“I don’t come cheap, Ayanokouji.”

I thought about his contract with Katsuragi. Ryuuen was happy to slip a hand into his opponent’s pocket.

“Well, I’m fine with your terms, but we can’t put them on paper. It’s a verbal agreement,” I told him.

“Heh. I didn’t exactly expect a signed document, since you like working in the shadows. Remember, if you welch on our deal, I won’t show you any mercy. I’ll make you regret it.”

“Answer me one thing. Even if you and I reach an agreement today, doesn’t the whole strategy fall apart if you can’t convince your class?” That would require a fair amount of skill and luck. If anyone had those things, though, it was Ryuuen.

“I don’t know. That’ll be up to Kaneda and Hiyori,” he answered.

In other words, Ryuuen was merely setting the stage. As the guy who’d ruled Class C with an iron fist, he probably thought it was the least he could do to make amends.

“Our negotiations are finished, then,” I said, shaking Ryuuen’s hand.

He couldn’t be controlled that easily. Even though he was “retired” now, I would need to work hard to keep him out of my way. I couldn’t afford to be careless.

“So, that’s it? In your original invitation, it sounded like you wanted me to meet somebody, but I can’t imagine there’s anyone worthwhile among the first years.”

“That’s right. It’s no first year,” I replied.

“Huh?”

“It’s time.”

Punctual as ever, a young man approached us. Upon seeing who it was, even Ryuuen couldn’t hide his surprise. “Really? This is who you wanted me to meet?”

I ignored Ryuuen and spoke to Horikita Manabu. “Sorry for calling you out so early.”

“It’s no bother. This is a good time for a secret meeting. A good place, too.”

The school campus provided limited options. At our current position, I could see anyone coming from a mile away. That had its uses.

“Seems like you’re pretty close with the former student council president. That’s probably useful for Suzune too, eh?” asked Ryuuen, chuckling. Of course, he’d already guessed that she was Manabu’s younger sister.

“I thought you’d be alone, Ayanokouji.” Manabu didn’t sound especially shocked to see Ryuuen, though. The elder Horikita briefly

noted that I was thoroughly covered in snow. Then he continued, ignoring the sight utterly. “I assume Ryuuen Kakeru is a coconspirator. I’ll speak quickly, then. There’s no telling who might spot us.”

“Wait just a second. Who are you calling a coconspirator?” asked Ryuuen.

“At the very least, he’s not an enemy,” I told Manabu.

“Ayanokouji, do you recall the promise you made when you sought my help earlier?” Manabu asked.

“Yeah. It was about helping you stop Nagumo Miyabi, right?”

“Nagumo? The new student council president?” Ryuuen asked.

Ryuuen was here because I wanted him to know what concerned Horikita’s older brother. “It seems he doesn’t really like Nagumo’s way of doing things,” I explained.

“I see. So, you plan to use Ayanokouji to stop Nagumo? Word has it he’s dominatin’ the second years. That means you gotta use a first-year student to deal with him, huh? Tell me, Horikita, since when have you had your eye on Ayanokouji?” asked Ryuuen, addressing the upperclassman condescendingly.

“Since soon after he enrolled. It appears that your path to understanding him has been longer and more arduous,” replied the elder Horikita. He sounded more indifferent than defensive.

“Heh. I’m the type of guy who thoroughly enjoys the journey,” said Ryuuen.

“Yet you appear to have been beaten,” Horikita Manabu shot back.

Ryuuen glared. “If you think I’m so easy to beat, care to put your fists up and find out?”

“I’ll pass, thank you,” answered Horikita calmly.

“Heh. I thought so,” Ryuuen snorted.

He crouched—then launched a front kick, sending snow flying toward Horikita’s face. His goal was to blind Horikita. Ryuuen jabbed at his opponent’s abdomen, but Horikita blocked the attack completely, even though Ryuuen had obstructed his vision. He pushed his glasses back up the bridge of his nose, looking completely unfazed.

“I thought you were some intellectual jerkoff who only had book

smarts, but you ain't half bad," said Ryuuen—a rare compliment.

"I already told you I didn't choose to fight," Horikita repeated.

"What's the matter? If you're not happy, you can come at me anytime. Or maybe you don't fight against first years?" taunted Ryuuen.

"You've made quite a fascinating friend, Ayanokouji." Horikita brushed snow and dirt from his clothes.

"Well, whatever. I suppose you're *somewhat* capable, Horikita-*senpai*." Ryuuen tacked on a sarcastic honorific.

"Likewise. You aren't fit to serve on the student council, but I suppose you've some measure of worth."

"Whoa. Complimented by the former student council president. What an honor."

Now that the two had finished their back-and-forth, the elder Horikita got to the point. "I'd like Ayanokouji to preserve and maintain order at this school. I don't care by what means. Ayanokouji, you may choose whatever's most convenient, whether that's having Student Council President Nagumo Miyabi removed from his position, or simply obstructing his plans. Once the third semester begins, Nagumo's power will only grow. He'll move quickly."

"So, how exactly are things going to change?"

"The student council isn't all-powerful, of course. But it does wield a certain degree of authority, unlike the councils at most ordinary schools. At present, whenever a problem arises within the student body, the student council takes the lead in resolving it. Both of you should be aware of that."

The faculty hadn't presided over Sudou's trial during the assault incident. Rather, it'd been the student council, headed by Horikita's brother.

"The student council also plays a role in designing the special exams. The first years' desert-island test was based in part on a student-council proposal."

That meant Nagumo could create a truly terrifying special exam.

"Nagumo's just tryin' to make this shitty, boring-ass school into something fun, from the sound of it. We should be happy," said Ryuuen, snorting in amusement.

“If he did it correctly, yes. However, Nagumo’s unorthodox measures have resulted in many expulsions. As a matter of fact, seventeen second-year students have already been expelled. According to their exit interviews, Nagumo was involved in over half the cases,” said Horikita.

Seventeen people. No small number.

“If he can get that many students expelled, it won’t be hard for him to rule the school,” I said.

“And, now that he’s student council president, he can control first- and third-year students, too. His influence will only grow in the third semester,” Horikita continued.

“Ain’t this Nagumo guy just being rational? If those seventeen people were worthless nobodies, then that’s why they got crushed.”

“The school will expel rule breakers. That’s only natural. However, shouldn’t a leader strive to help the entire student body graduate, without leaving anyone behind?” countered Horikita.

“Are you saying you’d never let a single person get kicked out of school, oh-so-venerable Horikita-*senpai*?”

“I’m speaking of the ideal scenario. Currently, no first-year students have been expelled. Pursuing the scenario where that continues isn’t a bad thing, wouldn’t you agree?”

“So you say. What do you think, Ayanokouji?”

“I think it’s fine,” I answered. “But I can also say that Ryuuen and I aren’t the type to pursue such a best-case scenario.”

“Heh. Exactly.”

If anyone was such an idealist, it’d probably be Ichinose Honami.

“Of course. I’m not trying to convert you,” Horikita said. “If you can stop Nagumo, that’s enough.”

It sounded simple. If it were, however, he wouldn’t be asking for our help.

“Well, I’m gonna head back before I get roped into becoming a coconspirator for real.” It seemed Ryuuen had no interest in student-council drama. “It was a pretty interestin’ chat, but any more would be a waste of my time. See ya.”

I called out to Ryuuen as he walked away. “Do you plan to go it

alone from here on out?"

"Save it. I've always been alone," Ryuuen answered. He trudged off through the snow, leaving only those words behind.

"Why did you let Ryuuen hear all that, Ayanokouji?"

"Mostly to shift his attention away from me," I replied.

If Ryuuen felt as though he had to fight the student council, he'd be less likely to come after me. Besides, he'd probably have a lot more fun battling someone like Sakayanagi. Of course, he didn't seem to want to fight anyone anymore.

"Well, you'll need all the friends you can get. In that sense, someone familiar—like Ryuuen—could be an asset," said Horikita.

"Familiar, huh?" Otherwise, what I needed right now was to collect as much data as I could. "I barely have any information on the seniors. Can you get me that?"

"Of course. I've already prepared it." Horikita pulled out his cell phone. I gave him my number and received a text soon afterward.

As I scanned the message, he explained. "I'll tell you which student council members to keep an eye on. One is Vice President Kiriyama, from the second-year Class B. Next is Secretary Mizowaki. Then there's Secretary Tonokawa. Both secretaries are Class B students who've stuck with Nagumo through thick and thin. They're also among the few students Nagumo will listen to. And now, the remaining members."

Horikita handed over documents with attached photos, almost like resumes. I deduced who belonged to which class with only a glance. Since several students were in Class A, including the vice president, I could guess Nagumo's real power. This was valuable information.

It wasn't easy to contact students from other grades. I couldn't afford to be careless, especially when it came to the student council's circle. It must've taken Horikita a considerable amount of time simply to gather the information he just gave me.

"The only people who know Nagumo's real personality and intentions are most likely those in his grade. Even though we were both in the student council, I don't know much about him myself," Horikita continued.

"But the second years are in his grip, which makes things more

difficult."

"Exactly. However, *one* second-year student opposes Nagumo," said Horikita.

"Who?"

"Unfortunately, I cannot tell you at the current stage. I can't guarantee their safety if Nagumo finds out."

"He might try to get them expelled? Is that it?"

"I can protect them while I'm enrolled here, but after I graduate, that protection will be gone."

Why was he telling me this? "You want to get me and this second-year student together, don't you?"

"I want to mention you to them as a capable first-year student."

Figured. If this second year had to stay undercover, that meant I should offer my name instead. I'd be in less danger. Still, I didn't want word of me getting around.

"What you do is entirely up to you," Horikita added.

Normally, I'd have declined. However, people like Sakayanagi and Ryuuen had already learned about me. Sakayanagi, in particular, knew a great deal about my life in the White Room. The more I tried to keep it secret, the more power I gave her. Even if I turned down Horikita's offer, I gained nothing.

"Understood. Tell them about me."

"A bold decision, but the correct one," Horikita replied.

"Now, all that's left is to see whether this works out."

"If you don't join forces with this student, you can't bring Nagumo down."

"All right. Let's do it your way, then."

I just wanted to be left in peace. As such, I had reservations about putting myself in Horikita's power. If I abandoned his orders after he graduated, what happened then?

"Do you know what I'm thinking right now?" I asked.

"You're thinking about what happens after I graduate," he answered.

Superb.

"I didn't think you'd broach the topic yourself," Horikita added.

"I can't read you," I replied. "I have to know."

"I don't mind if you only cooperate until I graduate."

"Until then, though, what if I can't beat Nagumo?"

"I wouldn't entrust so important a mission to someone incapable."

Did Horikita's brother truly think this highly of me? Or was he simply trying to flatter me? Either way, I couldn't get a read on him. "I'll try, but I can't guarantee that I'll succeed before you graduate," I said.

"I understand."

Why was this guy relying on a complete unknown like me? If he cared so much about the Tokyo Metropolitan Advanced Nurturing High School, he should've recruited a more enthusiastic person.

"I don't expect you to move heaven and earth because of a single debt. You don't intend to go above and beyond, either. Am I wrong?" Horikita understood everything quite well.

"As the former student council president, you still have some authority. Influence, rather," I replied. "I figured making you my ally would be useful." As long as I was enrolled here, I faced no shortage of risks; having friends in high places could help.

"Drop my name all you like, but don't expect too much of me."

"I don't plan to. I may call in one last favor, but that'd be it." Hopefully, I'd have no need of that.

"As you wish. Taking down Nagumo won't be simple, after all."

"I'll start on a strategy. But, before that, I want to know something about your little sister."

"You can use Suzune in any way you wish," he replied.

"It's not that. I've watched her in action for nearly a year now, and I think she possesses a certain talent. How is it you haven't noticed that? You grew up with her."

"Talent? What makes you think she's talented? Her academics? Her athletic ability?" he asked.

At least he'd noticed that she was gifted in those areas. "I mean

overall. She's clumsy in some respects, but generally very capable."

"My sister's incompetent. She always chased after my shadow. She's made it her goal to catch up to me. That's foolish," he spat.

"Is her earnestness the problem?" I asked.

"You may interpret things however you wish. It's not going to change anything."

"Yeah, you're probably right." Still, I was beginning to understand why Horikita's brother treated her so harshly. "If I told you that your sister was joining the student council, would you help her too?"

"I'd cooperate."

With that in mind, I began formulating a strategy to best Nagumo.

"I have the data," I said. "I understand what's at risk. All that's left for you to do is wait."

"Very well. Remember, this school's future depends on you."

Laying that exorbitant pressure upon me, the elder Horikita left.

4.1

AFTER THAT UNUSUAL MEETING, I headed back to the dormitory. There, I hung around aimlessly until noon, surfing the web and reading books. My next move was to send a message to Horikita. With the promise of her elder brother's attention as a reward, she'd probably consider joining the student council.

I need to talk to you.

Horikita was probably also cooped up in her room. She was fundamentally a loner; besides, she didn't seem to like the cold that much.

A few minutes after I sent that initial message, I received a reply. *I don't mind. Can we do it over the phone? Or must it be in person?*

In person, if possible. Would that work?

I'm at a café right now. Come here, and I'll listen.

Contrary to the isolated image I'd conjured up, Horikita was actually out. Leaving again would be annoying, but the sooner I looked after this, the better.

I'm headed over. I sent the reply and put on my coat.

When I arrived at the lobby, I saw Ike, Yamauchi, and even Sudou. They didn't appear to notice me as they headed out the door, and I didn't call out, choosing to follow and eavesdrop on their conversation.

"So, Horikita just turned ya down for a Christmas date? Dude, what the hell, Ken?"

"Shut it, Haruki. Just drop it."

"Man, we're all gonna end the year without girlfriends, huh? I feel empty inside."

"Tch. I'm just going to take things slow. It's not like Suzune's got a boyfriend or anythin'. It's just… I dunno, she doesn't seem interested in stuff like romance. I'm not gonna rush things."

Apparently, Sudou had put the moves on Horikita, but been shot down in a spectacular fashion. An honorable defeat. He was far from

giving up, though; he'd chosen to press on.

"You really got it bad, huh? Hey, Kanji, how about we pull an all-nighter at karaoke? Let's belt out lonely Christmas songs with everything we got!"

"Huh? Wh-what?"

"Whaddya mean, 'what'? I said we should do karaoke all night."

"Oh, uh…sorry, Haruki. I kinda can't today."

"Huh? You can't? You don't have anything to do on Christmas Eve, do you? The only hot date you've got's with your right hand."

"You know, I actually got stuff to do, dude." Ike was clearly agitated, but he wouldn't say why he couldn't go to karaoke.

Sudou, smelling blood in the water, pounced. "Hey, Kanji, don't tell me…"

"I-It's not like that." Ike sputtered. He lowered his gaze. "Look, I'm just going out to dinner with a friend, that's all."

Anyone could tell that this "friend" wasn't a man. A scene from yesterday flashed into my mind.

"Who is it?! Who're you hanging out with?! Spill it!" shouted Yamauchi, losing his cool and grabbing Ike's collar.

"I-It really ain't that big a deal, but…Shinohara."

"Shinohara? Wait a second…you mean, from our class? *That* Shinohara?!"

Ike nodded slightly.

"Dude, why Shinohara? Aren't you two always fighting?" asked Sudou in disbelief. Yamauchi seemed to share the sentiment. Ike and Shinohara were an unexpected pair, to say the least.

"Like I said, we're just having dinner," replied Ike. "Come on, there's no way I'd go for a girl like her, right? She just had some trouble a little while back, and I helped her out. She said she wanted to thank me!"

"Uh, no, dude. I dunno about 'thanking' you or whatever, but it's *Christmas Eve*!"

"It's no big deal!" Ike cried. "I mean, me and Shinohara going out? There's just no way. Not even if the world was ending!"

“I don’t believe you! Come on, Ken, let’s tail ’em!”

“Dudes, knock it off! If rumors about me and an uggo like Shinohara get around, it’ll be a huge pain in the ass!” shouted Ike.

Ike and Shinohara, huh? They might actually be a well-matched couple. Of course, who knew how any of this would turn out?

4.2

MOST STUDENTS HUNG OUT at Keyaki Mall during winter vacation, and the place was packed. Since more than 80 percent of the café customers were female, I couldn't find Horikita right away. After wandering a bit, I finally spotted her.

"I'm here."

"That was fast," she replied. I noticed that she wasn't alone.

"Good morning, Ayanokouji-kun," said Kushida.

This was a wholly unexpected pair. They had to be with someone else. I looked around.

"No one else is with us," Horikita said, noting my confusion. I thought that Hirata would be here as a peacekeeper, but apparently he wasn't.

"Not to sound strange…but which of you initiated this get-together?" I asked.

Kushida smiled gently.

"Me. I invited Kushida-san," said Horikita.

I hadn't anticipated that, but it made sense now that I thought about it. Horikita was trying to bury the hatchet with Kushida, and meeting in public put restrictions on what Kushida could do or say. Horikita had played this well.

“By the way, Horikita-san, how have things been with Sudou-kun recently?” asked Kushida.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, aren’t you spending Christmas with him?”

“I’d never do that,” said Horikita flatly.

“Really? Didn’t Sudou-kun ask you out?”

“That doesn’t have anything to do with the topic at hand, does it?”

Kushida had attempted to use my arrival to change the subject, but Horikita wouldn’t allow it. She could afford to be blunt, because she had two advantages: she’d won their previous bet, and the café was full of people.

“How long do you plan to stand around, Ayanokouji-kun? If you have something to say, spit it out.” Horikita clearly wanted to keep talking to Kushida.

“Sorry. I didn’t think there’d be someone else here. Another time.”

However, Kushida had apparently decided that my presence was welcome. “Come on, Horikita-san. How about we have Ayanokouji-kun join us for some tea?”

I stopped in my tracks, but didn’t sit down, feeling the pressure of Horikita’s angry silence. “Maybe next time,” I said, trying to escape.

“Wait. Say what you came here to say,” replied Horikita.

“No, it’s nothing.”

“There’s something you don’t want Kushida to hear?” Horikita asked, guessing what I was thinking.

“Is that true, Ayanokouji-kun?” Kushida wore a sad look.

I intended to deny it, but Horikita cut me off. “Kushida’s a member of our class. There’s no need for secrets.”

“This has nothing to do with the class. This is between you and me, Horikita,” I told her.

“I see,” she replied. “This does have something to do with me, then, right? Well, out with it.”

“I’ll pass.”

“If you won’t say it now, I absolutely won’t listen to it anywhere else.”

Horikita’s determination was steely. Maybe she thought total transparency would improve her relationship with Kushida. Kushida, for her part, smiled as sweetly as ever. Her smile always made you want to believe her kindness was genuine, no matter what unease you felt.

I might’ve been able to come up with a convincing lie, but I doubted that Horikita would be receptive to my real proposal once she found out. “In that case, I’ll come right out and say it.”

“Good.”

No use beating around the bush. “Do you want to join the student council?”

“I’m sorry. I’m afraid I’m not following you.” Horikita tilted her head. “Why do you ask?”

“I have my reasons.”

“Then continue.”

“Um, is this okay, Horikita-san?” asked Kushida.

“Is what okay?”

“Is it okay if I overhear this? If this is about the student council, it might involve your brother.”

“You’ve known about my brother since junior high. It’s a little late to worry.”

I steeled myself and sat at the table. “A certain person has a burning desire to see you on the student council.”

“A certain person?”

“Your brother.”

Strictly speaking, Horikita’s brother had said nothing of the sort. Rather, he’d said I was free to decide whether to use Horikita. To get her to act, however, I had to dangle her brother like a carrot.

“Why would my brother say that he wants me to join the student council? That’s unbelievable.” Horikita looked discouraged.

“It’s true.”

“If it were really true, my brother should’ve told me. Why did he go through you?”

“Is he the type to tell you things directly?”

“No. But he’s also not the sort to ask me to join the student council in the first place.” She just wouldn’t believe me. Was their relationship really that poor? “I have no intention of listening to your lies.”

“If you think that I’m lying, why don’t you confirm it yourself?” I asked.

“You’re being really stubborn.”

“Stubborn or not, just contact him.”

“Um…do you know his phone number?”

“No. Don’t *you* know it? As his sister?”

“I don’t know it.”

“Well, how about we try contacting Tachibana-senpai?” asked Kushida.

“Tachibana? My brother’s secretary?”

“Yeah. I’ve talked to Tachibana-senpai a lot. I know her contact information.” Just as I’d figured, Kushida was making friends in the most unexpected places.

“Are you really okay with me calling him, Ayanokouji-kun? If it turns out you’re lying, the consequences will be severe.”

“Do as you wish.” Horikita’s brother would recognize this as part of my strategy and cover for me; he’d say I was telling the truth.

“Thank you, senpai. Yes, I understand. Goodbye,” said Kushida, who’d just called Tachibana. She hung up and fiddled with her phone.

Horikita’s phone buzzed. Kushida had forwarded the contact information. “Thank you, Kushida-san.”

“Oh, you’re welcome.” Putting on a friendly face with Horikita had to be quite the struggle for Kushida.

Horikita stared at her phone’s screen. You might’ve thought that she’d call immediately, but her fingers didn’t move. She clutched the phone with both hands.

“Whew.” Horikita let out a deep breath. Being this nervous about calling a family member definitely wasn’t normal. “If this all turns out to be a lie, prepare yourself.”

“You don’t need to remind me,” I said.

My clear confidence unsettled her. I could tell she suspected I might be telling the truth. Horikita mustered all her courage and pressed the call button. She held the phone to her ear. The person on the other end of the line must’ve picked up, because her face grew even more nervous.

“Excuse me. I-It’s Horikita Suzune.” Horikita spoke formally, as if talking with a stranger. “I asked Tachibana-senpai for your contact information… Um, well, so I could call you, oniisan.”

Wearing a confused, flustered look that seemed out of place on her face, Horikita asked her brother the all-important question about the student council. Though I couldn’t hear, he seemed to confirm my version of events.

“Yes. Th-thank you very much. Goodbye.” Horikita ended the call and gave me an intense glare.

“I told you the truth, right? Why the angry face?” I asked.

“Why’re you the intermediary? That’s what baffles me.” Gosh, she was paranoid.

“Are you joining the student council, Horikita-san?” asked Kushida.

“No, I’m not.”

“Wait a minute. Your brother just told you to join, didn’t he?” I asked.

“He told me that joining would be good for me…but I can’t imagine that’s true.”

Even if I pushed Horikita, no good would come of it. At this point, I just wanted to stop giving Kushida information. “I understand. Well, I hope to talk to you later.”

“Wouldn’t further conversation be a waste of time?”

“Probably.” I stood.

“See you later, Ayanokouji-kun.” When Kushida spoke so gently to me, I sensed that something was amiss.

4.3

IT WAS NOW TEN O'CLOCK at night. Christmas Eve slipped away with every tick of the clock. Rather than go out and party with my guy friends, I stayed in and watched TV alone. A live broadcast showed people in Tokyo celebrating, all chock-full of Christmas spirit. I flipped through the channels, but every single program was Christmas-related. I did find a show ranking presents to give girls—though Christmas Eve was a little late to think about such things—and also a ranking of presents for children, but none of it looked particularly interesting.

I shut off the TV and turned on my computer, craving something non-Christmas-related. I scrolled through the news at random, noting accidents and incidents, articles on foreign athletes, and other miscellaneous stuff. Apart from it being almost Christmas, it was a day like any other day. Nothing ever really changed.

My doorbell rang. Not the lobby intercom—my actual doorbell.

"Coming." I made my way to the entrance.

"G-g-good evening, K-Kiyotaka-kun!" stammered a familiar voice as I unlocked the door.

"What's up, Airi? It's pretty late." It was already past ten, yet judging from her appearance, she'd just gotten back to the dorm. "Were you out? I thought the gathering wasn't until tomorrow."

"Yes, that's right. I was doing something different. I've been hanging out with Haruka-chan since two in the afternoon."

"I see." That was a long time to hang out. "Did you have fun?"

"I'm a little tired, but yes."

"I'm glad to hear that." I probably didn't need to worry about Airi. At the very least, she'd be safe with a member of our group.

"I heard from Haruka-chan that you have something going on tomorrow, Kiyotaka-kun. That means you won't be able to come with us."

Ah, right. I had indeed talked to Haruka about that. Hanging out with Airi was probably her way of "handling" things.

“Yeah, I do have plans. Sorry I can’t join you,” I told Airi.

“No, that’s perfectly okay. To tell you the truth, I planned to give you something tomorrow, but…” Airi handed me a package tied in a cute red ribbon. “Um, well…I hope…that’ll you like it.”

A Christmas gift.

“For me?” I asked.

“Yeah! I-I, um, got a gift for everyone else too.”

In that case, it was easy to accept. I took the present, wondering what was usually done in these situations. Should I open it now, or after Airi left?

As I agonized, Airi spoke. “I-I don’t mind if you open it now.” Well, that answered that question.

Inside the package, I found warm-looking gloves. “I’ve thought for a little while that you could use gloves, Kiyotaka-kun. You don’t have a pair, do you?” she asked.

“I was thinking of buying some. Thank you, Airi.”

“Hee hee hee! You’re welcome,” she answered.

The plain-blue gloves were simple in design, much more to my taste than the patterned ones I saw other students wear. I put them on right away—the first time I’d ever worn gloves, though I didn’t say that, of course. After putting on the left glove, then the right, I flexed my hands over and over to get used to them.

Airi happily watched me. “H-how do they feel?” she asked.

“They’re the perfect size, and warm.” If I’d bought gloves for myself, I would’ve picked these.

“I’m glad,” said Airi. “Well, uh, sorry for dropping by so late. Good night, Kiyotaka-kun.”

Airi turned to leave. I wouldn’t have minded getting her a cup of tea or something, but it was pretty late. On top of that, having a girl in my room on Christmas Eve might’ve gotten me in trouble.

As Airi headed for the elevator, she glanced back once, perhaps because she felt me looking at her. She gave a tiny wave, then hopped on the elevator.

After seeing her off, I went back inside. “When would be a good time to show my gratitude?” I muttered.

If you received a present on Valentine’s Day, you gave one back on White Day. I knew that much. What about Christmas gifts, though? I’d have to look that up later.

Chapter 5:
The Turbulent Double Date

CHRISTMAS DAY HAD ARRIVED. In the past, this day had meant little to me, but that wasn't the case this year. For the first time in my life, I'd spend Christmas Day with a member of the opposite sex. I wondered whether Satou would enjoy hanging out with me. Much as I'd have liked her to, we still didn't know each other all that well.

I'd never been on a real, honest-to-god, one-on-one date before. That should've been significant, but there was still so much I didn't understand. "Just go with the flow, I guess."

I left my room and took the elevator to the lobby. If I remembered correctly, Satou and I were going to catch a movie. We'd agreed to meet at 11:30, but I decided to get there a little early.

5.1

UNFORTUNATELY, IT WAS cloudy outside, and it promised to be cloudy all day. I got to our meeting spot ten minutes early, but when I looked up from checking the time, I saw Satou walking toward me. She seemed somewhat uneasy as she scanned her surroundings. Then our eyes met, and she grinned.

"Good morning, Ayanokouji-kun!" she called, hurrying over.

When she came up to me, I couldn't help noticing that she smelled nice. "You're early," I remarked.

"You too, Ayanokouji-kun. Did I keep you waiting, by any chance?"

"Nah, I just got here." A cliché line, but true.

"Really?" Satou leaned forward, playfully eyeing me like a cat that spied a mouse.

I nodded, feeling slightly overwhelmed already. Well, we had a few minutes left until our date was officially supposed to start, but perhaps we should just begin. I was ready to get a move on, but for some reason, Satou looked around the area again.

"Should we head out?" I asked.

"O-oh, yes. S-sorry, just give me a minute." She reached into her bag and rummaged through it, muttering to herself loudly enough for me to hear. "Did I forget it…?"

"You forgot something?" I asked.

"No, sorry. I just wondered what happened to my phone."

Looking into Satou's bag, I noticed a long, narrow box covered in wrapping paper. I strategically averted my gaze. "I can call your phone for you," I told her.

"Oh, thanks. You're really kind, Ayanokouji-kun."

Helping someone find their phone didn't seem especially kind. Most people would've done the same.

Satou continued to speak, sounding a bit awkward. "If I remember

right, this morning…" She paused. Then she shrieked, "Ahh! Found it!"

Good news, then.

She held up her phone and put it in her pocket, laughing. "Sorry to keep you waiting! Shall we go?"

But then…

"Good morning, Ayanokouji-kun."

Turning around, I saw Hirata Yousuke, looking as bright and cheerful as ever. I offered a wave in reply. Next to Hirata was his "girlfriend," Karuizawa Kei. Were they on a Christmas date? I knew their relationship was fake, but they might've been doing this to keep up the act. *Very clever.*

"Good morning, Karuizawa-san," said Satou.

"Morning," Karuizawa replied, smiling.

"This is a rare sight, you two together," said Hirata.

"Are you on a date, too?" I asked.

"Yeah. I didn't really make any Christmas plans, just in case," he told me.

So, he'd left his schedule open for his fake girlfriend Karuizawa's sake. Hirata always put others before himself. Though I admired him, I acknowledged that it wasn't easy to pull off.

"I thought one of your friends would've invited you out. No?" I asked Hirata. He was popular among our classmates, and even among the seniors in the soccer club.

"No, I think they probably wanted to give us alone time," he replied, glancing at Karuizawa.

From the outside, Hirata and Karuizawa embodied an ideal couple. No one wanted to get in a happy couple's way at Christmas. However, as long this fake relationship continued, Hirata couldn't get close to another girl. I felt kind of bad for him. Even if he developed feelings for someone, he'd never do anything to hurt or embarrass Karuizawa.

No wonder she chose him as her protector.

"Karuizawa-san's always been popular with the girls in class, but I didn't know she was this close with Satou-san," whispered Hirata,

looking at the girls warmly, as if they were his sisters or daughters.

“I thought they hung out a lot, like, on their days off. Is that not the case?” I asked.

“Well, I didn’t think so.”

“Really?”

“What do you think’s going on?”

“I dunno.”

In any case, I figured we shouldn’t hold up Hirata and Karuizawa any longer. I checked my phone. It was already 11:40, close to the movie’s start time. We should’ve made tracks for the theater, but Satou and Karuizawa were deep in conversation, apparently enjoying themselves. They were whispering, so I couldn’t pick out the words.

Feeling lost, I met Hirata’s eyes. He seemed to grasp the problem and interrupted Karuizawa. “Karuizawa-san, I think maybe it’s time to let them have their fun. Shall we?” he asked in his usual gentle tone.

“Hey, when did you guys start going out, anyway?” asked Karuizawa. It was a perfectly natural question.

“Huh? I-It’s not like we’re actually dating or anything, right?! R-Right, Ayanokouji-kun?” said Satou. She looked flustered. I shook my head in response.

However, Karuizawa regarded us with obvious suspicion. “Eh? I mean, you guys are on a date on Christmas Day. That means you’re going out, right? Don’t you think so, Hirata-kun?”

“Well…I suppose that’s what people would assume, yes.”

“That’s, well, um… I only invited Ayanokouji-kun to hang out,” said Satou, fidgeting bashfully. “I-Is this okay, A-Ayanokouji-kun? Spending Christmas with me?”

“If I didn’t want to, I would’ve declined your offer,” I told her.

“Hee hee!” Satou lightly scratched her cheek.

“Hunh. So, does that mean you’re interested in Satou-san, Ayanokouji-kun?” asked Karuizawa.

“C-come on. Stop it, Karuizawa-san,” said Satou, blushing bright red. She fanned her face, as if attempting to cool it.

Karuizawa kept going. “So, why don’t you just start dating

already? Christmas is a time for romance."

"I really don't think it's our place to say that to them, Karuizawa-san." Hirata politely tried to rein her in.

"Sorry, sorry. I'm being nosy, huh? Sorry, Satou-san."

"Oh, no, it's okay. I don't mind," replied Satou.

"Hey, don't you think a double date sounds like fun?" asked Karuizawa.

"A double date?" I replied. Hirata and I glanced at each other.

"Yeah, yeah! Me and Hirata-kun could go with you two. Doesn't that sound like fun? I just thought it wouldn't be a bad idea to hang out, you know?"

If we'd arranged this beforehand, that'd be one thing. But Karuizawa proposing a spontaneous double date baffled me. The plans Satou and I had made would go up in smoke. Judging from Hirata's expression, he felt the same. However, Satou didn't show even the slightest hint of surprise.

"I'm sure that these two have other plans," Hirata told Karuizawa, but his words had no effect.

She continued, undeterred. "Satou-san just told me that she thought it sounded fun. Right?"

"Yeah, it does sound fun." Apparently, they'd already discussed this.

Regardless, Hirata looked concerned. "How about next time? If we're going on a double date, I think it'd be better to plan in advance."

"Well, I guess. But doesn't the fact that it's unplanned make it kinda fun?" asked Karuizawa. She sounded excited, as if her heart was set on the double date.

Unlike Hirata and I, who grew anxious without a plan in place, Karuizawa seemed to thrive on spontaneity. Maybe she was looking for a thrill precisely because her romance was fake? I wasn't so sure. I knew her well enough to doubt this would really be that fun for her. Still, why else would she propose a double date?

"Remember, it's Christmas," stated Hirata. He wore a troubled expression.

"You don't want to, Hirata-kun?" Karuizawa asked bluntly.

“I’m fine with it, personally, but isn’t this up to Satou-san and Ayanokouji-kun?” he asked.

Satou gave Karuizawa a look that seemed to say, “This isn’t too much bother, is it?” I wondered how she really felt about this double-date proposal. “It might be a little sudden, but I’d like to try it…I think,” she said.

Maybe Satou just couldn’t refuse a proposal from Karuizawa, the queen bee of Class D. That really didn’t seem to be the case here, though.

“What do you think, Ayanokouji-kun?” asked Satou.

First the baton had passed from Hirata to Karuizawa, then Karuizawa to Satou, and now from Satou to me. I couldn’t carelessly drop it. “Well…”

Hanging out with just one girl was stressful enough. But a double date? It was a daunting prospect for a dating newbie like me. Still, I didn’t want to be the sole dissenting voice. I supposed that, if Satou was willing, I shouldn’t object.

This still left some problems. Satou and I had planned to watch a movie, and I didn’t know whether that would even be possible anymore, since we might not be able to get seats next to one another. Or maybe ditching those plans was part of being spontaneous?

This date wasn’t going the way I’d expected. Still, I couldn’t say a double date was *all* bad. There might’ve been awkward moments of silence if I were all alone with Satou, but Hirata and Karuizawa could keep the conversation going smoothly. Besides, even though Haruka said that she’d make sure Airi didn’t bump into us by chance, it might still happen. In that case, it’d probably look more natural if four of us were hanging out, rather than just Satou and me.

“If you three are okay with it, I don’t have any objections,” I said.

Karuizawa immediately took action. “All right. Where were you two planning on going now, anyway?”

Satou looked just a little relieved. Maybe she’d been nervous, too? Maybe she was anxious about being alone with me. “Um, well, Ayanokouji-kun and I planned to see a movie,” she said.

“The one that just opened today?” Karuizawa asked. “Oh, that’s lucky for us. We were also planning to see it. Whoa—it looks like we

even picked the same screening! That's amazing!"

The two girls were incredibly excited about this coincidence. I couldn't help noticing Satou's stiff expression, though.

"What a coincidence, huh, Ayanokouji-kun?" This serendipity seemed to surprise even Hirata. Since the movie had just come out, it *was* quite the stroke of luck.

"What do we do about the assigned seats, though? We can't change them, can we?" I asked. It was time to see whether these coincidences just kept coming.

"No, we can't. Let's see." Karuizawa fiddled with her phone.

"How's it look, Karuizawa-san?" asked Satou, peeking.

"It looks like…we're sitting in different places. Oh well." Karuizawa showed Hirata their seats. We were in completely different spots. So, this was where the coincidences stopped.

"Okay, I think it's about time we get going, Ayanokouji-kun!" said Satou.

When we first met up, she'd looked so meek and nervous. Running into Karuizawa and Hirata seemed to restore her usual vigor, and she stuck close to me as we walked. *Very* close. The four of us, now on a double date, made our way toward the movie theater. We walked through the mall lined up side by side: me, then Satou, then Karuizawa, and finally Hirata.

"Whoa. The two of you look good together," muttered Karuizawa, watching Satou and me.

"R-really?" asked Satou.

"Yeah. I mean, you guys look like a couple that's used to spending Christmas together. You know, you just give off those warm, fuzzy vibes," said Karuizawa.

"Hee hee! She says that we look like a couple, Ayanokouji-kun. Isn't that embarrassing?" asked Satou.

"Guess so." Well, we *were* out on a Christmas date. The observation made sense.

"But you two aren't, like, officially going out?" Karuizawa asked. "Or *are* you, hmm?"

"N-no, we're not. Really. It's not that kind of relationship!"

sputtered Satou.

“Reeeally? If you’re hiding something, you better spill,” said Karuizawa.

Karuizawa was clearly teasing us, but Satou didn’t actually seem to mind. If anything, she seemed like she enjoyed it. It was difficult to wrap my head around at first, but the more I thought about it, the more it made sense. If people thought that I was dating one of the hottest girls in school, I’d be embarrassed when they teased me. But, at the same time, I’d feel pretty pleased with myself. That said, I doubted that Satou felt so strongly about me.

“That reminds me, Satou-san. You don’t have a boyfriend yet, right?” asked Karuizawa.

“Y-yeah, that’s right.”

Karuizawa was relentless. I half-listened to the conversation, trying to decide how I could survive this double date with my dignity intact. Before I knew it, we were at the theater.

“Well, I guess we gotta part ways for a bit. Don’t mind us, you two,” said Karuizawa.

That was it? She was just taking off? I could usually predict Karuizawa’s behavior, but so much was going on here that I didn’t understand. So, even though this was a double date, it’d just be Satou and me for a while? I didn’t get it, but I decided to go with it.

More to the point, I didn’t know what to say to Satou. I knew almost nothing about her. I’d tried scrounging up information during these past couple days, but I’d gotten nowhere. I hadn’t been able to talk to her at all since before winter vacation. I was sure she was similarly out of her depth.

Granted, I had a few generic questions up my sleeve about things like favorite foods, hobbies, and so on. Now that the moment was here, however, those questions evaporated right out of my head. I didn’t want her to think something like, *Whoa, this guy does whatever online self-help guides tell him to.*

As I agonized over what to do, Karuizawa’s eyes met mine.

“You’re being pretty quiet, aren’t you? Isn’t the quiet type a tough role to play on a date?”

“I’m not playing a part. I genuinely have no idea what to do.”

We communicated that with a mere exchange of glances. Or maybe I just imagined that was what Karuizawa was thinking. The seconds kept ticking, and no one said anything.

"Satou-san, maybe Ayanokouji-kun doesn't know what to talk about?" asked Karuizawa. Her question cut through our silence like an arrow.

Satou looked relieved. "Do you like idols, Ayanokouji-kun?" she asked. Maybe she'd wondered what to ask me, too.

She'd lobbed the conversation ball at me; a nice, gentle toss, and easy to catch. "Idols? To be honest, I'm not all that familiar with them. I don't really like or dislike them, though. Do you like them, Satou?" I asked.

"Yeah, quite a bit. I like those 'cool' idols, but I guess girl idol groups are 'in' right now. Have you heard anything about those? There're, like, *so* many of them."

"Yeah. They're on TV every day. You mean those groups that do their own original song-and-dance routines, right?"

"Yeah, that's what I'm talking about. I really love them. There're so many good songs, too."

"Hunh." I nodded at Satou's relentless idol lecture.

"Ooh—I especially love this one group's debut single! I'll lend you the CD," Satou added.

"Thanks."

I'd made a conversational error. The discussion was going to fall apart if I only responded "hunh" and "thanks." Satou would end up doing all the work. She'd tossed me the ball; now, I had to throw it back to her.

"What kinds of songs do you listen to?" she asked.

This time, I'd toss the ball right. What kind of songs did I listen to? That was a surprisingly simple question, but the answer got stuck in my throat. If I opened up to Satou about my interests and hobbies, how would she respond? I mean, if I mentioned Beethoven or Mozart, that'd definitely be a swing and miss. On the other hand, saying that I liked "natural" sounds like rainfall or chirping birds would seem bizarre.

I shouldn't tell her about my tastes. She wants me to discuss current

music, right?

"There was a really popular movie this year, right?" I asked her. "An anime."

"Uh, yeah. That romance movie, right? It was super moving, wasn't it?"

"I've been listening to stuff by that one group…you know, the group that performed the theme song. That kinda stuff." I didn't remember the band's name, but I *had* listened to that theme song countless times. I hoped that'd keep the conversation going.

"Ah! I know that band! Yeah, I *so* love them, too!"

I'd returned the ball, and Satou caught it. However, we couldn't stay on this topic too much longer.

"You really know a lot about them," Satou added.

"You think? I just know basic things, really."

Man, girls were better at conversation than I'd anticipated. It might've had something to do with the different expectations that'd existed since the beginning of time for gender roles.

"You're not part of any clubs, are you? Weren't you in track and field before?" asked Satou.

This choice of topic was easy to understand; it was likely due to my participation in the relay during the sports festival. "No, I've never been in any clubs," I told Satou.

I mean, I'd been a member of the "go home right after school" club for as long as I could remember.

However, my running skills had clearly impressed Satou. "Really?! Even though you're super fast?! That's incredible! I mean, you were even quicker than the student council president!" she exclaimed.

Maybe because of Satou's giddiness, Karuizawa cut in on our conversation. "Wasn't the student council president just slow? Like, maybe it was a race between two slowpokes," she said.

"I don't think that's true at all, Karuizawa-san," replied Satou. "Both of them were really fast."

"Hmmm. I find that hard to believe. Ayanokouji looks like he'd be no good in a fight. Besides, he's a really cold dude, you know. Like, if someone close to him came down with a bad flu, he wouldn't even visit

them," said Karuizawa. Her voice positively dripped with sarcasm.

She'd brought up fighting for no reason at all. I understood the cause of her anger now, at least. Karuizawa resented me because she thought I didn't care about her. After her horrifying ordeal with Ryuuen on the roof, she could've gotten very sick. Maybe she'd proposed the double date to interfere with my plans?

"I don't see him that way, though. I think Ayanokouji-kun's a kind person," said Satou.

"Huh? Really?"

"I think Ayanokouji-kun's kind, too," said Hirata.

"Well, now I feel like you're ganging up on me," Karuizawa said. Even though she sounded annoyed, I got the feeling that she teased me precisely to make Satou rise to my defense. Almost as if she *wanted* me and Satou to be an official couple.

"U-um, well, it's just…you know…well, um…" Satou stammered. She wasn't smiling anymore. It seemed like she wanted to say something, but couldn't find the words. "U-um, hey, is there anything you'd like to ask me, Ayanokouji-kun?"

Well, the conversation had been pretty one-sided for a while. It was only fair that I take a turn.

"You know how we can't contact anyone on the outside while we're here at school? Does that ever bother you at all?" I asked.

Satou pondered her answer. "Yeah. I've been worried about a lot of stuff." She thought a moment longer, then continued. "Back in junior high, I had a cat. I think my mom's taking care of it for me, but not being able to see it's been really hard."

It made sense that being separated from family would be difficult for most. Not being able to see a beloved pet had to be tough, too—almost like a parent not seeing their child.

"Not seeing your cat for three years certainly sounds hard."

"Did you have any pets, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"Uh, no. I wanted a dog, but my parents didn't allow it." That was basically true.

"I see. Speaking of dogs, I saw a little puppy on campus the other day," said Satou.

“Huh? Really?” asked Karuizawa. Apparently, she was done letting Satou and me talk. She seemed to have really listened to our conversation.

“Yep! It was someone’s pet doggy,” replied Satou. “It was so cute!”

“Since students can’t have pets, it was probably an employee’s or teacher’s,” said Hirata. True, a dog wouldn’t just wander around campus on its own.

“It’d be so nice having a pet,” said Karuizawa. “It’d be the best thing ever.”

“I agree,” Satou replied. “It’d be great to have a pet shop around here.”

“Why aren’t we allowed pets, anyway?”

“I know! It’s totally not okay.”

The two girls got all worked up while Hirata and I walked along in silence. Although pets did a lot for emotional health, I could see numerous reasons why the school wouldn’t want them in the dorms. Even one animal per person would mean potentially hundreds in the building. Besides, if everyone left their pet all alone half the day to attend class…

The girls didn’t seem interested in logic right now, though. They were more preoccupied with the fact that dogs and cats were cute.

I was being a stick-in-the-mud, and kind of unreasonable. Even I was aware of that much. *What a stupid thought.* Logic wasn’t the point here. If I cut in to remind the girls that they couldn’t have pets, I’d only end up souring the mood.

“I’d like to get a rabbit. They’re relatively easy to raise, and they’re docile,” said Hirata, joining the conversation with ease. Both girls smiled. Men who could easily talk about anything were always popular.

Before I knew it, the time came to switch topics. As I thought about what to say, my eyes met Satou’s. “H-hey, Ayanokouji-kun. Um…”

Satou had been fine a minute ago, but now she stammered again. Her nerves always seemed to give way whenever she really wanted to ask something. Was she like this with everyone, or just the opposite

sex? She seemed ready to speak, but then closed her mouth again. It was probably an extra-difficult question.

"So, what's your type, Ayanokouji-kun? In girls, I mean?" Before Satou could get the words out, Karuizawa asked me that question.

"I-I'm curious about that, too," said Satou, sounding relieved. Maybe it was the very question she wanted to ask. In that case, perhaps this double date wasn't such a coincidence after all. I'd had a vague suspicion of that from the beginning.

Either way, I needed to answer. *The kind of girl I like, huh?* "That's a tricky question," I said.

Satou's eyes sparkled, but Karuizawa glared at me. Hirata, meanwhile, looked like he was enjoying this.

"Spirited, I guess?" I finally replied. The moment I said it out loud, I knew that wasn't exactly the right word. Many—maybe even most—girls might consider themselves "spirited." Satou and Karuizawa didn't seem thrilled by my response, either.

"Hunh. I didn't think you'd be into girls like that, Ayanokouji-kun," remarked Karuizawa.

Were Satou and Karuizawa both the spirited type? They definitely weren't as dour as Horikita. But Kushida and Ichinose were spirited, too. Right?

"Wait, do you think there're only two types of girls, Ayanokouji-kun? The spirited type, and the quiet, gentle type?" Karuizawa added.

"Is that true?" Satou asked me.

"No, it's not. It's just that I'm relatively quiet, so I thought it'd be nice to date a girl who was sort of the opposite. If I misspoke, I take it back," I told Satou and Karuizawa. I had a feeling I might've insulted them.

"So, what's going on between you and Horikita-san? What's the deal there?" asked Karuizawa.

Still with the interrogation. I wanted to say it was none of Karuizawa's business, but Satou's expression had clearly changed. This might be another question she also wanted to know the answer to.

Very few people understood my relationship with Horikita, but I knew that Karuizawa did. Therefore, she'd asked for Satou's sake. If

Satou had any affection for me, she must've confided in Karuizawa about it, resulting in the double date. In other words, Satou must've asked Karuizawa to back her up, so Karuizawa was digging for information, helping where she could.

I didn't know which of them initially came up with the double-date idea, but I assumed that Karuizawa concocted the plan's finer points.

KIYO-
TAKA

“There’s nothing going on between Horikita and me. I mean, we’re both doing our own thing on Christmas.” The proof of the pudding was in the eating, as they said.

“But that doesn’t necessarily mean that nothing’s going on, right?” asked Karuizawa. She really wasn’t letting this go. “Maybe you’re interested in Horikita-san, but she’s not into you. Maybe you don’t have the guts to actually ask her out. Hmm, Ayanokouji-kun?”

“I suppose it’s possible.” I mean, anything was possible.

“S-so, was hanging out with me a bother, then?” asked Satou anxiously.

“Like I said, if I didn’t want to, I would’ve said no.”

“I see. I’m relieved to hear that.”

“But there’re totally guys out there who try to keep their options open when the girl they actually like doesn’t like them. You know, they have a girl they can fall back on if their crush doesn’t work out,” said Karuizawa.

A rather nasty thing to say. If I responded with something like, “Do I seem like someone with that much game?”, she might answer “Yes,” and then I’d be stuck. Was she hounding me like this for Satou’s sake? I felt as if I were trying to ford a crocodile-infested river.

“Do I seem like someone with that much game?” I asked.

“Yes, you do.”

“Hey.” Just as I thought, I’d jumped in the river and been spectacularly devoured.

“Maybe you’re really in love with Horikita-san, but hanging out with Satou-san like she’s a consolation prize, right?” said Karuizawa. Now she was just trying to make me look like a jerk. Maybe she *didn’t* want things to work out between me and Satou.

“I don’t think that Ayanokouji-kun is the kind of person who’d do that, though,” said Satou. “Right, Ayanokouji-kun?”

“I’m not that clever,” I replied.

The moment I said that, Karuizawa changed her angle of attack. “Aren’t you pretty close to Kushida-san too, Ayanokouji-kun?”

“R-really?!” Satou jumped as if she hadn’t noticed who I hung

around with at all.

“I think Kushida gets along with everybody,” I said. The crocodiles weren’t just in the river anymore. They’d abandoned the water to fly through the air, chasing me.

“Aren’t most guys in love with Kushida-san, though?” Karuizawa mused.

“What do you think, Hirata?” I asked. I needed him to save me from these flying crocodiles.

“Kushida-san’s quite popular, but I don’t think everyone necessarily wants to date her. Anyway, I doubt Ayanokouji-kun has feelings for anyone in particular,” he replied.

Hirata to the rescue. He’d swooped in and solved all my problems, exactly as I’d hoped.

“If Yousuke-kun says so, I suppose it must be true,” said Karuizawa. She still seemed dissatisfied, but she relented. Hirata’s words carried weight that wasn’t easy to dismiss.

Go, go, Hirata.

“Hey, you four. Got a minute?” As we were about to enter the movie theater, someone called out to us. We turned around. “You’re Ayanokouji, right?”

“Yeah, I am.”

I was going to ask who he was, but the words got caught in my throat. He had a sharp gleam in his eye and a certain *je ne sais quoi* about him. I’d seen him on several occasions. There probably wasn’t a student at this school who didn’t know Nagumo Miyabi from the second-year Class A.

Several students hung around Nagumo, probably his friends. Among them were student council members: Secretaries Mizowaki and Tonokawa, and Vice President Kiriyama. There was a single first-year student, too: Ichinose Honami, from Class B. When I noticed her, she only gave me a gentle smile.

After the arrival of such distinguished upperclassmen, the double date’s atmosphere grew tense. The student council members paid no attention to me, continuing their conversations.

One senior, however, glanced at me. I recognized the girl. She was

the upperclassman who'd dropped her phone charm when we passed each other some time ago. "You're a first-year, right? Miyabi's friend?"

"I've never actually talked to him before," Nagumo told her. "You don't remember? He was the student who squared off against Horikita-senpai in the relay race."

"Ah, okay. I thought I recognized him from somewhere."

"Hey, can we talk for a minute? You have some time, right?" Nagumo asked me.

It was obvious that the four of us were hanging out. Even so, being invited to talk to a senior student—and the new student council president, to boot—was an offer I couldn't refuse. Satou shrank back, and Karuizawa looked slightly upset.

Hirata stepped forward. He was probably the only person in our group who could face off against Nagumo. Still, he couldn't just say "another time" to an upperclassman. I wondered how he'd settle this.

"Good morning, Nagumo-senpai."

"Hi, Hirata. How's soccer going?"

Before taking on the student council president role, Nagumo played with the soccer club. Hirata clearly intended to make use of that.

"We're giving it all we've got. You should join us for practice next time. Excuse me, senpai, but did Ayanokouji-kun do something wrong?" asked Hirata.

"Huh? Oh, no. I wouldn't pick on one of my underclassmen, would I? I just wanted to talk to him, is all," Nagumo laughed. From the look in his eyes, however, it seemed more serious. If I didn't step in soon, things might get worse.

"Can I help you with something?" I asked in a formal, stiff tone.

"Come on, don't get all nervous. Well, I guess that's too much to ask. You guys go on ahead," Nagumo said to his friends. Maybe he thought the large crowd intimidated me.

"Hurry up, okay?"

"Got it."

Nagumo sent his entourage off. As we watched them leave, he spoke again. "We're going to karaoke. You guys wanna join us later?"

“Well, I—”

“I’m joking. I mean, if someone like you joined us, it’d ruin the mood,” he replied with a scornful laugh. “So, you’re the student Horikita-senpai’s been so fixated on. I’m just following the rumors, is all.”

“Are you talking about the relay race, Senpai?” asked Hirata, expertly jumping into the conversation.

“Yeah. You watched that too, huh?”

“Yes. I already knew that Ayanokouji-kun was really fast.” A lie, but Nagumo had no way of knowing that. “Besides the race, what’s Ayanokouji-kun done to make you notice him?”

“On the outside, he’s an ordinary student, except for how fast he is. Hmm,” said Nagumo, wearing a stern look. He grabbed my arm.

Satou, Karuizawa, and Hirata looked shocked. It probably seemed like we were on the verge of a brawl. Even Hirata, who knew Nagumo, froze.

“President Nagumo, you’re totally nuts,” Karuizawa laughed, clearly trying to defuse the situation.

“Oh, did I scare you? Sorry. My bad,” replied Nagumo, looking at her amiably. He didn’t let go of my arm. “I do have a high opinion of Horikita-senpai’s instincts,” he told me. “If he sees something in you, you must be special.”

“You must really trust his opinion. The student council president’s, I mean,” I replied.

“*Former* student council president. After he graduates, I have a whole year at this school. Won’t you play with me?”

I knew things were fraught between the elder Horikita and Nagumo, but I hadn’t thought that they were intense enough for Nagumo to preemptively attack me. I’d taken him for the type who was happy as long as people around him were content. That didn’t seem to be the case anymore. He wanted to make a show of his strength as a threat.

“May I ask something?” I asked. Until now, I’d been completely passive. Nagumo smiled. “When you became student council president, you said that things would get interesting at this school. You said that talented students would rise to the top. What’re you planning?”

I might as well ask at this point.

"I imagine that you first years have had some shitty, boring tests so far. I've had it up to here with those banal games. What if we had a special test based on a popular online game? Don't you think that sounds *really* interesting?" he asked.

"An…online game?" I blinked in surprise.

Nagumo chuckled. "Don't be so serious." He let go of my arm, still laughing, but his eyes remained dead. "Sorry for pushing in on your date. See ya around." With that, Nagumo followed his friends toward the karaoke place.

We were all silent a moment.

"Whew. Now, *that* sure was something, wasn't it?" asked Hirata, relieved that nothing had happened.

Satou, who'd been utterly silent, suddenly bubbled over with excitement. "Th-that's amazing, Ayanokouji-kun! W-wow, to think the student council president thinks so highly of you!" she exclaimed.

"It's really not that big a deal," I said, but Satou remained starry-eyed.

"I dunno. I mean, the only thing Ayanokouji-kun has going for him is that he's, like, a fast runner," said Karuizawa, giving Hirata a smile. "Yousuke-kun's a hundred times more amazing. He's super fast—like, the fastest. *And* he's really smart, too. I mean, if Nagumo had his eye on anyone, it'd be Yousuke-kun, right? Isn't this weird?"

"I definitely think that Hirata-kun's amazing, but…but…but I don't think that he could beat Ayanokouji-kun!" Satou stammered.

It was nice that Satou believed in me, but she didn't need to go that far. Besides, she'd make Karuizawa snappish if she kept saying stuff like that.

"Yousuke-kun couldn't beat him? Uh, aren't Ayanokouji-kun's grades totally lame compared to Yousuke-kun's, though?" asked Karuizawa.

"W-well, that's… He's still smarter than me!" said Satou.

I mean, she wasn't wrong—but I wished she wouldn't say it so proudly.

"Isn't that great, Ayanokouji-kun? Satou-san thinks so highly of

you. Though it's weird that you get all this attention just by running fast," said Karuizawa.

"I guess," I said. *Ah yes, Karuizawa. My biggest admirer.*

I had a sinking feeling that she was going to be like this all day.

5.2

THE MOVIE THEATER was even fuller than it'd been the other day, which made sense, between them fixing the equipment malfunction and the release of some hot new titles. I didn't see Ibuki. Maybe she wasn't interested in an American animated film, or maybe she was just avoiding the crowds, planning to see it later.

Everyone got their tickets, and we went in.

"Oh, uh, that reminds me, Karuizawa-san. Would you please come with me to the bathroom?" asked Satou.

"Sure. The movie's gonna start soon, though, so let's hurry."

Satou dragged Karuizawa to the bathroom, leaving me with Hirata.

"How do I put this? Nicely done," said Hirata. "Karuizawa-san's the first classmate I tried to save, you see."

He was wasting his Christmas on a fake date with Karuizawa. Could it be that he genuinely had feelings for her? No. His neutral expression gave me the sense that that wasn't the case. All I saw was Hirata Yousuke, someone who always put others ahead of himself.

"I'm really grateful for what you did for Karuizawa-san, Ayanokouji-kun."

"I didn't do much."

"I'm glad that you and Karuizawa-san were in the same group during the ship test. She can stand on her own two feet now, without me."

"She's not quite there yet, though. Right?"

"You mean, because I'm still pretending to be her boyfriend?"

"Yeah." Karuizawa had grown. She was stronger and more resilient, and Hirata sensed that. She wouldn't truly be free until she left him, though.

"It's just a matter of time, I think," Hirata said. "We barely talk anymore. Apart from her plans today, I don't think she needs me now."

“This might be blunt, but are you really okay with wasting your Christmas on this?” I asked.

“Yeah. I’m Karuizawa-san’s boyfriend, after all. I mean, I haven’t wanted to date any other girls. I probably won’t in the future, either.”

“Really?”

“You see, Ayanokouji-kun, if everyone else is happy, then I’m happy,” he said.

“So, you don’t need romance?”

“I don’t. That’s how I feel right now, anyway.”

Hirata was blessed with such good looks, a great personality, and so much talent. What a waste.

“What about you, Ayanokouji-kun? Do you want to go out with Satou-san?” he asked.

“Well…” *No, not really. But saying that would be like negating the date itself.* “I don’t know. I can’t really say right now.”

“This might not be my place, since I just said that I don’t need romance…but I think it might be good for you to go out with someone, Ayanokouji-kun.”

“What, are you gonna hit me with the ‘you’ve never had a girlfriend before, better get on that’ speech?”

“Ha ha ha! No, no. I mean, it’s certainly true that you don’t seem to have had a relationship. But I don’t think that’s because you’re unpopular. Is it because you just haven’t found anyone you like romantically?” he asked.

“Honestly, it’s both. I’ve never been popular, and I haven’t found anyone.”

The White Room didn’t specifically forbid romantic relationships. There just wasn’t any way for romance to blossom. Playtime, holidays—they didn’t exist there. We were monitored constantly, except during toilet breaks and bath time. You couldn’t grow close to someone under those circumstances.

“Isn’t it exhausting, though? Always putting yourself second? Sacrificing yourself for the class’s sake?” I asked.

“Exhausting? On the contrary, it’s a lot more exhausting to see the class in disarray. Honestly, my anxiety’s gone way down since I started

at this school."

True. Back on the island, when the class had nearly fallen apart, I saw Hirata come close to his breaking point. He'd clearly improved now that Class D was coming together.

Hirata Yousuke was one of Class D's real leaders. He was indispensable, but also worryingly fragile. The island test worked out fine in the end, but I couldn't predict what'd happen to Hirata if the class broke down again…due to Kushida, for instance. Back in junior high, she'd caused her class's total collapse. Even now, she was working against Horikita, implying that she'd destroy her own class if she deemed it necessary.

If that happened, Hirata might snap. If the class's very heart stopped beating, who knew?

Since the two girls hadn't returned yet, I switched topics. "How much do you know about Student Council President Nagumo, Hirata?" I asked. They'd been in the same club, after all.

"Not much, really. Outside the club, I don't really interact with him. And since he became student council president, we only really ever say hi to each other in the hall."

"Okay then, what's your impression of him?"

"I guess I thought that he was an interesting upperclassman. He introduced bold, exciting new ideas, even for soccer practice. They didn't always work, but they were fascinating, even when they made practice especially tough." Hirata chuckled. "Anyway, he always gets results. Apparently, he's even led his team to victory in major tournaments."

"So, he's the perfect upperclassman, huh?"

"Well, I'm not sure I'd put it like that." Hirata shook his head. "The road to glory is hard. Quite a few people have left the club."

"I haven't heard any rumors about that."

"Probably because those students aren't here anymore. The second years who butted heads with Nagumo-senpai quit the club and dropped out of school."

"Isn't that a little extreme?"

"I don't know the details…like how much Nagumo-senpai was

involved."

Maybe Nagumo wasn't the sole reason the students had dropped out. Maybe they left for personal reasons. What bothered me was what Horikita's brother had said earlier, about how Nagumo removed anyone who stood in his way.

Nagumo was the light, and those who opposed him were shadows. He wanted to thoroughly eradicate that darkness, but it wasn't so simple. Where there was light, there were always shadows. No matter how many you eliminated, new ones arose.

"Are you joining the student council, Ayanokouji-kun?" asked Hirata. A reasonable deduction, given our conversation thus far.

"No, I'm not." I made sure to be very clear. Even if Horikita ultimately refused, I absolutely wasn't going to join. That would be more than a small favor, and it would have a huge impact on my life. *I'm sure I could install Karuizawa in my place as a puppet, if it came to that.*

She wasn't the best candidate for the job, though. I needed someone who would follow my orders without question, who was talented enough to join the student council on their own merits, and whose presence wouldn't seem odd. Hardly anyone in our class cleared all three hurdles.

"I see. I think you'd do quite well if you joined, Ayanokouji-kun."

"I should be the one saying that to you, Hirata. You're student-council material."

"I'm not a good fit. Besides, I don't want to quit my club." He liked soccer that much, apparently.

If Hirata *did* join the student council, I'd have another card to play. I wasn't going to press him any further, though. I was still happy in the outfield, catching whatever came my way.

"Well, student-council issues aside, we'll probably have a tough time starting next month, won't we?" Hirata asked.

"You mean, because the school will bump us up to Class C?"

"Yeah. A and B will be wary of us, and the new Class D will try to trip us up. If we make a wrong move, we could be Class D again as early as February."

It was natural to be apprehensive. Class point totals rose and fell

all the time. Even a trivial mistake could make Hirata's fears come true.

"I do think everyone wants to reach Class A, though," Hirata said.

"Do you think they'll still feel that way if it takes backbreaking work?"

"That's exactly the problem. Aiming for the top requires a lot of the class." Just as Hirata was about to say something else, the girls called us.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting, Ayanokouji-kun!"

Karuizawa and Satou were back, halting my conversation with Hirata. Since the movie was about to begin, we headed into the auditorium together.

5.3

I DIDN'T NORMALLY WATCH animated films, but this movie exceeded my expectations. The animals were surprisingly expressive, and the story was moving, if simple. I left the theater with Satou, who tightly clutched the juice she'd bought.

"That was really good!" she exclaimed.

I couldn't help but agree. I was just getting hungry, too—with perfect timing. Hirata and Karuizawa exited slightly after us, and we hurried to our lunch reservation.

While we walked, Satou resumed our conversation. "Hey, um, Ayanokouji-kun. Do you mind if I ask you something that might sound kinda…insensitive?"

Maybe because we'd both enjoyed the movie, Satou was walking closer to me than before. It wasn't just physical closeness. Our emotional distance had closed by about a half step.

"Fire away." If I could answer, I would.

"I have a question too!" Even though we were having separate conversations, Karuizawa butted in again.

Hirata spoke up as well. "Why don't we all take turns asking each other questions?"

Hmm, not a bad idea. I could ask Hirata some things that'd been on my mind for a while.

"Sounds good! I'll go first," replied Karuizawa. She immediately looked at me. "Have you ever gone out with anyone before, Ayanokouji-kun?"

Hirata had asked me the same question. To be more precise, he hadn't asked so much as discerned the answer. It was hard to believe this had been brought up twice in a single day. It wasn't a comfortable topic, but Karuizawa and Satou both fixed their gazes on me.

"Right now, no." I tried to keep it vague. It felt like Karuizawa was just messing with me.

"In other words, your age equals the number of years you haven't

had a girlfriend," replied Karuizawa.

Well, that was brusque.

"You know, Ayanokouji-kun, that's just the kind of evasive answer an unpopular guy would give," she added.

"Really? Even if I had a girlfriend in the past, I don't have one right now," I said.

"So, you had one, then?"

"Well…no."

"See, I told you!" Karuizawa exclaimed. She bounced up and down.

Satou seemed glad, too. "I don't think that's bad, though. Like, if you were obviously unpopular like Yamauchi-kun or Onizuka-kun, that'd be one thing. But it's more like you're just not in a rush. That's all. Right, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"You understand Ayanokouji-kun pretty well, Satou-san."

"I…wish I understood him, but I still don't really know much about him at all. That's why I'd like to ask him some questions. Hey, um, Ayanokouji-kun. Which do you like better? Girls with long hair, or girls with short hair?" Satou asked.

Fairly straightforward questions: the type of girl I liked, whether I had a girlfriend, and now, what kind of hairstyle I preferred. Together, these questions seemed designed to construct a specific girl's image.

"I don't really care. As long as it suits the girl, it doesn't really matter," I replied.

"That's a boring answer," Karuizawa shot back. She loved pointing out my failings.

"I feel the same way. Whether it's a guy or girl, if it suits them, it's not an issue," replied Hirata, swooping in with the assist.

Karuizawa gave him a smile. "Honestly, I think the same thing, you know? Even though some girls change their hair to suit their partner's taste, it's pointless if it doesn't look good on you. Right?"

She always supported Hirata's ideas in public. Still, this was becoming ridiculous. If Karuizawa wanted to get Satou and me together, why was she going to such lengths to paint a negative picture of me?

“I think that’s great, not caring about hairstyles and things like that!” said Satou.

Far from seeing me in a negative light, Satou’s eyes sparkled. Karuizawa looked at her with something like respect. No matter how hard she tried to knock me down, Satou would lift me back up.

“Hey, Hirata. Are you aware of how popular you are?” I asked.

Karuizawa glared at me when I asked that. Satou assumed a weird expression, too.

“You should ask Satou-san questions, not Yousuke-kun,” said Karuizawa.

“That’s right. It feels like Ayanokouji-kun and Hirata-kun are gonna propose marriage to each other or something,” Satou joked.

“Okay, but…” I trailed off.

Since Satou didn’t know my extensive history with Karuizawa, I couldn’t just start talking to her. It was still hard for me to jump into conversation with Satou, since I didn’t know her very well. Therefore, I’d turned to Hirata. No matter how delicate the situation, Hirata could handle it. Besides, there were things I wanted to know about him.

“You can ask me anything, Ayanokouji-kun,” said Satou.

“Let’s see…”

As I struggled to escape this nightmare, we arrived at the restaurant. The conversation came to a merciful halt. Since Satou made reservations beforehand, we were instantly guided to our seats. The table had hand towels and disposable chopsticks…for four people.

“Huh? It’s for four?” The reservation was for two. It should just have been Satou and me.

“Uh, I asked Satou-san about this place when we went to the bathroom. I added seats to the reservation. Right, Satou-san?” said Karuizawa.

“Y-yeah.”

“You’ve really got this handled, huh?” I said.

“I mean, I guess. When it comes to things like this, I’ve got *lots* of experience. Guess you could say I’m a battle-hardened veteran,” said Karuizawa.

"You liar." I told her silently, with my eyes.

She glared back at me. "*Don't give me that, Kiyotaka. You've never gone out with anyone before in your life!"* Her eyes were very expressive.

"Is there anything you want to ask Satou-san, Ayanokouji-kun?" Karuizawa repeated. Apparently, I wasn't escaping this conversation.

"What do you usually do on your days off?" I asked.

Karuizawa reacted with blatant shock. "Seriously? That's the best you can do?"

Even Hirata looked perplexed by the irritation Karuizawa radiated at this point. She probably wondered why I wasn't using any of the information she'd helped me acquire about Satou. However, I hadn't done research with the intent of specifically leveraging it to make this date succeed or anything. I wanted to know more about Satou as a person. That was all.

"It's okay, Karuizawa-san. I'm happy that Ayanokouji-kun asked me something," said Satou with a smile. "Hmm. Well, I like to hang out with friends, I suppose. It's boring to be all alone."

She was probably talking about her group of girlfriends. I could clearly picture them hanging out.

"But, sometimes, I like to read about stuff on my own. Like fashion design, for example," Satou continued sheepishly. "I just think that becoming a designer might be pretty cool, I suppose."

"Oh? This is the first I'm hearing about that. So, you're one of *those* people, huh, Satou-san?" asked Karuizawa. I had absolutely no idea what she meant. It seemed like girls had their own secret code that only other girls understood.

Satou nodded. "I thought if I graduated from Class A, I could get in somewhere good."

It wasn't a bad thing to aim for Class A, but Satou should also have considered what to do if she graduated from Class B or below.

"Have you thought about what you'll do in the future, Ayanokouji-kun?" asked Satou, gently tossing the ball back at me.

Since I hadn't given any real thought to my future, I gave a safe answer. "College, I guess."

"Ugh, no thanks. Not for me. I definitely don't want to have to

study even more," said Satou. "I mean, compulsory education ends after junior high, but it seems like it doesn't *really* end until after high school, right? People make fun of you if you stop at junior high."

It was certainly true that the social norm was to finish high school. It was still sort of compulsory education, in that sense.

"I'm probably gonna go to university too. College clubs seem like they'd be really fun," said Karuizawa, surprising me by not rejecting the notion of higher education. Her answer was vague too, but everyone seemed to be thinking about the future.

It was kind of fun hanging out in a group I didn't normally spend time with—but exhausting at the same time. Doing this every day would've been extremely tiring.

5.4

AFTER WE FINISHED EATING, we wandered around Keyaki Mall for a bit. It was after four now, and the double date—which had gone for almost five hours at this point—was nearly over. The day was unexpectedly fun, despite Karuizawa's attempts to introduce complications. Still, I didn't want to do it again.

"So, what next?" I asked. I knew it was possible that Satou wanted to add another stop to our date.

"Well, maybe we should head back, huh, Yousuke-kun?" asked Karuizawa, switching from happily bullying me to being suddenly considerate. Her goal from here on out was to leave Satou and me alone. I could see her and Satou signaling one another via eye contact.

Hirata nodded. "Yeah, it's getting late. Let's head on back, Karuizawa. It was fun hanging out with you today, Ayanokouji-kun. See you later. You too, Satou-san."

Spending an entire day with Hirata had convinced me that he was truly a person of noble character. A saint. Hirata could get along with anyone. If this double date had succeeded, it was entirely due to him.

"Thank you both so much," said Satou.

Hirata and Karuizawa walked off at a brisk pace. Satou waved goodbye.

"So, what are we going to do now?" I asked.

"Oh, um…how about we take a little detour on our way back?" she suggested.

With no particular reason to decline, I agreed.

"Okay, then let's go."

We got back on the path to the dorms. Satou, who'd chattered rapid-fire up until a little while ago, grew quiet.

"I'm sorry about this turning into a double date and all," she said.

"I was surprised at first," I admitted.

"Those two really are amazing, aren't they? They're just, like, made for each other," said Satou. "I really look up to them, you know?"

“Definitely.”

Even though we were walking close together, our hands weren’t touching. Not a single ounce of the boldness Satou displayed in front of Karuizawa and Hirata remained. It wasn’t awkward or anything, but the mood had changed for sure.

“Thanks for inviting me today. I had fun,” I told her.

For some reason, Satou still looked anxious. “Hey, Ayanokouji-kun…you didn’t really have fun today, did you?”

“No, I did.” I was being genuine, but for some reason, Satou didn’t believe me.

“But…”

“Why would you think that?” I asked.

“Well, it’s just…you didn’t smile once today, Ayanokouji-kun.”

“I didn’t smile?”

Satou kept going. “I would’ve liked to see you smile at least once, but…” I really didn’t have any complaints about how the day went, though. As I wondered how to explain that, Satou spoke up again. “Does the fact that I once wanted to mess with Horikita-san have something to do with it?” She looked anxious, like she was about to cry.

When we first started school, Horikita had been something of a loner, with a strong tendency to mock her classmates. Understandably, this didn’t make Satou fond of her. As a matter of fact, Satou once proposed messing with Horikita in a group chat. I shot the idea down, but Satou clearly remembered.

“I really don’t mind,” I said. “I completely forgot about that.”

“Really?”

“Well, it’s not surprising that people didn’t like Horikita back then. Besides, Horikita herself wasn’t in the group chat when you brought it up, and it’s not like you actually did anything to her. I wouldn’t judge someone based on such a trivial thing,” I told Satou.

Everybody gossiped. As long as you didn’t actually hurt the person in question, it wasn’t a big deal.

“Really?” asked Satou.

“Yeah. Really.”

“But you still didn’t have fun, did you? I mean, you didn’t smile.”

“Well, I’m just genuinely bad at smiling, is all.”

I had no idea whether Satou believed me. She probably thought I said that to console her. Truthfully, I might still disappoint her. I just didn’t feel the way about her that she clearly felt about me, so, in a sense, her concerns about my not having fun weren’t entirely off the mark. I *had* enjoyed hanging out, but I hadn’t enjoyed it in the way Satou hoped.

“You’re not convinced?” I asked.

“Well, it’s not that I’m not convinced, but…” Satou trailed off. She turned away briefly, got something out of her bag, and held it behind her. “U-um, hey…” She steeled her gaze, as though gathering all her courage for some mighty task. Apparently, she was about to confirm my fears. “Um…p-please go out with me, Ayanokouji-kun!”

A strong gust of wind whooshed past.

It was the first romantic confession I’d ever received.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed someone hiding in the bushes, but I ignored them for the time being. Prolonging this would only hurt Satou more. I chose my words immediately, being as honest as I could out of respect for Satou’s courage.

“I’m sorry, Satou. I can’t be that for you.”

“Oh! I-I see. I guess it’s hopeless, huh?” Satou, clearly fighting not to break down, gave me a small smile. “W-well, for future reference, could you maybe tell me why? Is there someone else you like?”

“It’s not like that. I’m just not ready for a relationship. It’s really me, not you,” I told her. “No matter who asked me out right now, my answer would be the same…whether it was you, Satou, or someone like Horikita or Kushida. I can’t go out with someone if I don’t love them back.”

I’d give Airi the same answer if she ever decided to tell me about her feelings.

“This might sound kind of lame, but I’ve never had feelings for anyone yet. I’m not rejecting *you,* personally. I just haven’t really matured enough to handle romance,” I said.

“I see.”

There wasn’t anything else I could say.

“Maybe I rushed things. It’s not like you can really know a person after just one date,” Satou reasoned. She nodded as if having a conversation with herself. Frankly, such an honest confession had required a tremendous amount of courage on her part.

“I might’ve missed out on my chance,” I said quietly. I’d turned down a girl who was honest and brave. Some part of me felt like I was making a mistake. It was the part of me that wanted a fun, normal high school career, including finding a girlfriend. But I didn’t say anything.

My phone vibrated in my pocket. I didn’t know who was calling me, but I couldn’t answer it right now.

Satou put the gift-wrapped box back into her bag. “Thank you for everything today, Ayanokouji-kun.”

She understood that my reply and feelings wouldn’t change. Even if Satou liked me in this moment, she might not feel that way tomorrow. Maybe she’d find a new love. However, I’d never forget that Satou was the first to say she loved me.

“Is it…okay if I ask you to hang out again?” she asked.

“Of course. I had fun with you, Satou. I’d like to hang out, too.” I really meant it.

“Yeah.” Satou nodded.

Even though the awkwardness was still there, things were rapidly returning to normal. The winter cold pierced through us.

“It’s freezing. Should we head back?” I asked. We couldn’t just stand around here forever. However, when I started to move, Satou remained firmly in place.

“Satou?” I looked back to see tears welling in her eyes. She quickly wiped them away with her arm and smiled at me.

“Sorry. I think I’ll go on ahead!” With that, Satou ran through the snow, leaving me behind.

I quietly watched her go. “Guess I understand.”

I waited until she was out of sight, making sure we wouldn’t bump into each other in the dorm lobby, before resuming my walk home.

If my issues with the student council and my father didn’t exist, maybe I could’ve answered Satou differently. If she’d told me her

feelings before the relay and my father's visit, I might've accepted. Ironic, since the relay was what made her develop feelings for me.

A normal boy in his first year of high school might've taken up the first girl to offer him affection. But I *wasn't* normal. Better to keep things simple.

"Now then…" I had to take care of some unfinished business before I could call it a night. As I headed for a patch of bushes, my phone rang again. Onscreen were the words *unidentified caller.* For a moment, I thought about ignoring the call, but then accepted it and brought the phone to my ear.

The mystery caller remained silent, even after a few seconds.

"Hello?" I said. However, there was no reply. "I'm hanging up."

"Can I trust you?" came the voice on the other end.

"Who are you? Why should I trust *you*?" I threw the question back at them.

"What Horikita-senpai talked about. Taking down Nagumo. Are you willing to help?"

Ah. So, Horikita's brother told that previously mentioned second-year student about me. Still, calling from an unidentified number? This person sure was paranoid.

"What's your name?" they asked. The elder Horikita gave them my phone number, but not my name? Well, if they had my phone number, they could figure the rest out with a little digging.

"I don't think you need that right now," I answered.

"Fine. I have a pretty good idea of who you are, anyway. I recognize your voice." That narrowed down the options for who they were, too. Not many second-year students were that familiar with my voice. "I want to meet you right now," they continued.

I'd expected as much. "Shouldn't you be more careful about this?" I asked. It was almost dusk. It'd be dark soon.

"It's fine. Can you meet me immediately?"

I glanced over at the bushes. "Yeah. You're in luck, too."

"In luck?"

"To be honest, if it were any other time, I would've refused."

I'm sure the mystery caller found this baffling. "There's a secluded spot next to the school building," they said. "Meet me there in ten minutes."

"Sorry, but I've got a little business to take care of. Is it okay if we meet in twenty?" I asked.

"Fine."

The call ended. It wouldn't take longer than five minutes to reach the meeting spot, but I'd given myself a little time buffer. That meant I should conclude my business in the next fifteen minutes. Someone was waiting for me, and it was cold out here.

"If you stay there, you'll freeze to death," I said to the person in the bushes.

No one answered.

"I have to go. Is it okay if I leave you here?" I asked.

Finally, a voice answered hesitantly, "When did you notice me?"

"Right at the start. You heard Satou confess her feelings, right, Karuizawa?" I asked.

"N-not really. I only heard a little." Karuizawa stood up from her hiding place. Since she'd hidden in the bushes, snow had fallen on her shoulders. "Brr…it's cold."

"What happened to Hirata?" I asked.

"Dunno. He probably went home." She stepped onto the path, brushing the dirt and snow off herself. She'd waited in the cold so long that her nose was red.

"It's freezing, huh?"

"I guess."

Still acting tough, then.

However, something was bothering Karuizawa more than the frigid night. "Anyway, why did you turn Satou-san down?"

"What do you mean? You said it yourself, didn't you? It's despicable to go out with someone you don't actually have feelings for."

"Well, sure, but…don't they say something like 'if you don't eat, you don't get a toothpick'?"

"Uh, I think the expression you're looking for is 'not eating the

meal set before him is a man's shame.' Like, it's shameful to spurn a woman's advances," I replied. "Still, Satou's a normal girl. She wants a normal romance. Do you really think I can give her that?"

"That's…well, it's kinda hard to picture."

Karuizawa understood me better than most people. She knew how much I'd actually have liked a normal life. Still, I couldn't give Satou what she wanted. Even if I made myself date her, I'd waste her time. These few years at school were a precious resource.

"Look, it might not be my place to say, but don't you think you're being a little too humble?" asked Karuizawa.

"Humble?"

"I mean, yeah, you're not like normal guys, Kiyotaka. On top of that, you pretend to be someone you're not, right?"

"I think it's more that I choose not to reveal everything."

"So, yeah, some girls would probably be disappointed by who you really are. But when someone's really in love, that kind of stuff doesn't matter, y'know? I mean, I think Satou-san would've accepted you as you are," said Karuizawa.

"Is that what you meant by 'humble'?"

"Yeah. Well, since you already turned her down, I suppose you can't take it back. Even though I, like, went through all the trouble of shooting love's arrow at you. I didn't even miss; it just bounced right off you."

"Love's arrow?"

"Forget it. It doesn't matter." She gave a devilish chuckle. "Girls get over stuff fast. Satou-san will probably fall for another guy soon, won't she?"

"Nothing I can do about that."

"Whoa. I think I hear some regret in your voice."

"Knock it off. This was my decision."

Karuizawa seemed unconvinced. "Couldn't you have tried going out with her to see what it's like? I'm sure you were aware of her feelings for you. Inviting someone out on Christmas isn't what someone who's 'just your friend' does. When you accepted the invitation, didn't you know what she wanted?"

“Isn’t it possible that going on the date allowed me to determine that I’m not compatible with Satou?” I asked.

“That’s… Well, sure. But, from what I saw, things looked like they were going well. You seemed to be having a lot of fun.”

“To be perfectly honest, I’m not entirely opposed to the idea of dating Satou.”

“S-see? I knew it.”

“I probably could’ve had some good times with her,” I said.

Karuizawa looked angry now. “What do you mean, ‘good times’?”

“I mean, exploring things. All the way. You know.” I tried to convey the idea as mildly as I could.

Karuizawa understood what I was getting at. “Huh?! Y-you mean, you would’ve gone out with her for such a gross reason?!” she shouted.

“Haven’t you ever wanted to do it?” I asked.

“I-I don’t know! I don’t know anything about that kind of stuff! It’s a whole different world to me!”

“And you’ve never thought about exploring that unknown world?”

“That’s…that’s, well… Doesn’t it matter who your partner is?” she asked.

“Well, I guess you wouldn’t just want to do it with anyone.” Ideally, you’d want your partner to be someone you genuinely cared for.

“Obviously!”

“But that’s what I’m saying—I’d be okay with that person being Satou.”

“W-well, why’d you reject her, then?! You could’ve experienced this whole ‘unknown world’!” Karuizawa barked.

“Hey, don’t get mad.”

“I’m not mad!”

She most definitely was. I had a pretty good idea of why, too.

“If I chose to date Satou, would you still be standing here with me?” I asked.

“Huh?”

“That’s why I didn’t say yes to her.”

If I’d started going out with Satou, school would’ve been better than ever. I’d have had a partner to share my joys and sorrows with, and our relationship would’ve deepened with time.

But I knew that dating Satou would affect Karuizawa. Choosing Satou would’ve meant that it’d be harder to work with Karuizawa. Karuizawa would’ve become warier of me.

The rooftop incident had been a turning point for Karuizawa. Her trust in me grew exponentially, and I knew now that she’d never betray me. If Ryuuen, or Sakayanagi, or even someone like Nagumo approached her, she wouldn’t crumble. The only thing that’d break her would be my dating another girl.

She’d be scared that I didn’t need her anymore. She’d panic. She’d become useless to me, and I didn’t want that to happen.

Now, if Satou was a good replacement for Karuizawa, that’d be an entirely different story. But after today, I knew that Satou couldn’t fill Karuizawa’s shoes. She wasn’t as charismatic as Karuizawa, or as good at thinking on her feet. The double date made that abundantly clear. Karuizawa had adeptly played it off as a coincidence, while Satou struggled to keep up the lie, looking visibly upset at times.

The confrontation with Nagumo had clinched it. Karuizawa took action to defuse the situation, while Satou just stood by. That boldness was important. I could ignore the student-council issue, but I couldn’t ignore Sakayanagi or my father. If either of those two really went to war, it’d jeopardize my life here. Until I eliminated those threats, I needed Karuizawa.

On top of that, there was Chabashira-sensei and Chairman Sakayanagi. I didn’t sense trouble at the moment, but they were still potential targets. As such, Karuizawa Kei was indispensable. The chairman had power over us students, but I might be able to take him down if I used Karuizawa as a honeypot. She’d probably balk at sexual stuff, but she was still highly versatile.

“Maybe I’m just crazy, but I feel like you only view people as tools, don’t you, Kiyotaka?” she asked.

I’d used Karuizawa as a tool too many times to deny it. “I don’t view people like that because I choose to.”

“Hey, um, this might sound naive, but…have you ever actually fallen in love with anyone?”

“Right now, no.” I’d have liked to fall in love with somebody. But the opportunity hadn’t presented itself. Maybe I was incapable of love. Though I understood the biological differences between men and women, everything else was alien to me. My time in the White Room had seen to that. “In the end…”

“What?”

“Uh, nothing.”

I’d left the White Room physically, but some part of me would always be stuck there, where we lived in a state of constant self-defense. *You shouldn’t need your guard up at all times in normal, everyday life.* Going out with Satou would’ve let me experience normal joys, a normal relationship…but I couldn’t visualize what “normal” might look like for me yet. I’d worked to protect myself against any opponent who might arise; I didn’t know how to stop. No one else mattered, so long as I won.

Maybe I’d be this way until the day I died.

As I walked, Karuizawa followed. She didn’t walk at my side, but stayed close enough that we could converse. This way, no one would know we were together if they passed.

“Ugh. I put in all that effort for Satou-san’s sake, and it ended up being a waste of time,” she complained. Her tone was so playfully bratty that you’d never have thought she suffered a traumatic experience just a few days before.

“You’re doing pretty well, considering everything that happened to you,” I said.

“It’s been years since I was bullied like that,” she replied.

“You said it started in elementary school, right?”

“Uh, yeah. That’s right. Sorry, Kiyotaka. I lied a little bit about my past.”

“You lied?”

“I told Yousuke-kun that I was bullied for nine years. That was a lie. I thought that saying I’d been bullied since elementary would make him want to save me more than if it’d just been since junior high. I mean, he wouldn’t want me to be the victim of even more constant

bullying," she explained. She chuckled and stuck out her tongue playfully.

Ah, so she lied to manipulate Hirata. That just proved her resourcefulness and determination.

"Anyway, aren't you going to apologize again? For putting Manabe and her friends on my case?" she asked.

"Now that you mention it, you're right. The double date made me forget all about that."

"Oh, and another thing. You said you weren't going to contact me anymore, but then you did. You know, you're sending me mixed signals."

"I take back what I said about not contacting you anymore. If it's okay, I'd like to apologize to you another time," I told her.

"It doesn't sound like your heart's in it. I'm not going to get my hopes up, so just apologize now."

"Now? How?"

"I've told you lots of different things. Now you tell me something, Kiyotaka."

"About what?"

"This afternoon. Student Council President Nagumo. What's the deal?" she asked. She wanted this information as part of an apology? "I don't know what made you go all out during the sports festival relay, but I feel like more and more people are noticing you," she continued.

"I'll nip that in the bud. Fortunately, the class is more united now. I can take a step back."

"Yeah, I guess. But Class B is way, way more tight-knit than us. We can't beat them in that area," Karuizawa replied. "Anyway, unity aside, you really just want to step back?"

"You got it," I said.

"It seems a bit weird that you're getting all this attention *just* because of the sports festival, right?" she asked. She'd noticed, correctly, that it was odd to attract Nagumo Miyabi's attention just by being a fast runner.

Since this was Karuizawa, I could tell the truth and save myself trouble in the future. "Bear in mind that Horikita from our class and the

former student council president are siblings."

"I figured as much. That reminds me…during the relay race, you and the student council pres—no, I guess the *former* student council president—you two started together. Do you know each other, Kiyotaka?"

"Yeah. Through his little sister. That's why he notices me."

"So, he knows who you are beneath the mask?" asked Karuizawa.

"Beneath the mask, huh? No. He only knows what's on the surface. No one else at this school knows me as deeply as you do," I said.

"Hmm. That sucks." Yet she didn't *look* unhappy. Knowing someone's secrets could be a heavy burden, but it also made you feel special. Karuizawa and I knew each other's secret selves.

"Besides, the 'former student council president' title comes in handy. I do owe him a debt from the rooftop incident," I explained.

"Oh, yeah. Yeah, I did meet him there."

"He's pressing me to return the favor."

"Does that have something to do with why Student Council President Nagumo's suddenly paying attention to you?"

"Horikita's brother and Nagumo oppose each other. They're rivals. The fact that her brother's been talking to me probably doesn't sit well with Nagumo. He seemed like he was fixing for a fight during the relay."

"Wow. This is complicated. So, you're in the middle of a fight between those two?"

We were getting to the heart of the matter now. "Horikita's brother wants me to drag Nagumo off his throne and remove him as student council president."

"He put you in charge of *that*, Kiyotaka?"

"Talk about a tough job, huh?"

"If anyone could stop that incredible student council president, it's you."

"You think that I can do it?"

"If you can't, no one else can."

It seemed Karuizawa's opinion of me had improved significantly in the blink of an eye. No amount of humility on my part would fool her now.

"Speaking of all this, I'm supposed to meet a certain second-year student right now," I said.

"A second year? Who?"

"Dunno. Their identity's still a mystery. They haven't confirmed who I am, either. I just know that this is the only second year who isn't quite so fond of Nagumo."

"Am I in the way, then?" asked Karuizawa.

"If you want to hang around, that's fine by me. What're you going to do?" I knew she'd follow, but wanted to confirm it.

"I'll come along," she replied.

I turned my phone off. Then the two of us headed to the school building to meet the mystery caller.

Chapter 6:
Where the Arrow Landed

CHRISTMAS DAY. Students were on their way back to the dorms from club activities. It was unlikely that anyone would see me, even a teacher. There weren't enough lights on in the building to attract attention.

"It's cold. They're not here?" asked Karuizawa.

"They're late," I replied.

It was twenty minutes past the agreed-upon time. No one was nearby.

"They're this late after calling *you* out here? Talk about rude," said Karuizawa.

"Maybe they're nearby and scoping us out," I replied.

"What? That's unfair, isn't it? They confirm your identity, then head back?"

"I'm sure they'd like to, but they probably can't afford to do that."

I was almost certain that this person would contact me. I'd brought Karuizawa to add some camouflage. I'd look odd if I showed up alone in an isolated spot, but today was Christmas. Karuizawa and I could pass as a couple. Even if the mystery person tried calling me again via a blocked number, my phone was turned off. The only way for them to be certain of my identity was by talking to me directly.

As Karuizawa and I waited patiently, a lone student approached us. I'd seen him before. The moment our eyes met, I understood. He was definitely not who I expected.

He didn't say my name. "Sorry to keep you waiting."

"We just got here, Vice President Kiriyama."

His eyes widened in surprise. "It seems you've gathered some information on the student council already. Your name's…Ayanokouji. Right?"

It wasn't strange that Vice President Kiriyama remembered my name. He'd stood nearby when I spoke with Nagumo earlier today.

“I never imagined that the vice president, of all people, would want to take on President Nagumo,” I remarked.

“Before we get into that, let me ask you something.” He looked at Karuizawa. “Who’s this? I don’t know her.”

“She’s trustworthy. She’s my partner,” I replied.

Karuizawa looked momentarily excited before she quickly regained her composure.

“Trustworthy, huh? Well, why not? This situation’s already hopeless if I have to turn to a first year for help,” Kiriyama said. He’d accepted Karuizawa’s presence very easily. Either he was that dissatisfied with Nagumo’s regime, or he trusted Horikita’s brother that much. “Can we cut to the chase? I don’t want to draw this out.”

“Same. I’ll catch cold if I stay here much longer.”

“I’ve never agreed with Nagumo once. I joined the student council because I admired Horikita-senpai. He was my senpai from Class A. Well, he used to be, I suppose.” Kiriyama’s defeat at Nagumo’s hands had knocked him down to Class B. Frankly, I was surprised Nagumo had kept him on as vice president. “I wanted to stop Nagumo from becoming student council president, but it was impossible. It’s beyond the scope of my abilities.”

“The story about President Nagumo bringing all the second-year students under his control… How much of that is true?” I asked.

“Almost all of it. There are those dissatisfied with the situation, but not enough to vote Nagumo out. They’ve resigned themselves to his rule,” Kiriyama replied.

“Hey, Kiyotaka. I understand uniting your own class, but how could you possibly make *other* classes your allies? Isn’t everyone competing to reach Class A?” asked Karuizawa.

“I’m sure Vice President Kiriyama will explain.”

“Nagumo promised reform,” Kiriyama told her. “He said capable students would be promoted to Class A, no matter where they’d started. There are a lot of dissatisfied people at this school who feel they were placed in the wrong class.”

Karuizawa appeared slightly confused. I clarified. “He means people like Horikita and Yukimura.”

“I see. But that wouldn’t be enough, right?” Karuizawa asked. “I mean, most of the students from the lower classes aren’t that talented.”

“Nagumo says that every student will be given a chance,” explained Kiriyama. “I don’t have any more concrete details yet.”

“Isn’t that kinda suspicious?”

“Yes, but those are his terms. Anyone in Class B or below already feels the pressure mounting. The gap in class points between Class A and everyone else is widening.”

“Shouldn’t you be seizing the opportunity to return to Class A, Vice President Kiriyama?” I asked. “I mean, you oppose the president and lose, that’ll never happen, right?”

“If I believed there was really a chance Nagumo’s idea could work, sure. But I don’t think he’ll actually give everyone a fair chance at climbing the ranks. There’s just no way. He can’t guarantee that.”

“Didn’t you think about resigning from the student council when Nagumo became president? I mean, no one wants to work under somebody they oppose, right?”

“If I left, what then? Nagumo would be even more free to wreak havoc. I thought it best to infiltrate his inner circle and collect information…try to find an opening I could exploit. If I hand that information to Horikita-senpai, I’m sure he can do something with it.”

Even though Kiriyama spoke in a detached, matter-of-fact way, frustration seeped into his words.

“Do you understand how hard this is for me? Having to stand by and grit my teeth, knowing that if I can’t stop this, the school’s done for?” he asked. Unfortunately for him, I didn’t. “Well, I suppose there’s no way you would. There are no first years like Nagumo. But that doesn’t mean you’re safe, either. Nagumo’s watching Horikita-senpai and the third years for now, but once they graduate…the first years will be his next target.”

“Ugh. He sounds like the worst,” said Karuizawa.

So she said…but I could see benefits to following Nagumo. If he could make former rivals fall so readily in line, he had to be both competent and persuasive.

“Well, forget about fighting back or whatever. Wouldn’t it weird for us to poke our noses in student-council affairs?” asked Karuizawa.

“Until now, yes,” replied Kiriyama. “But you’ll be seeing a lot more of the senior students from this point on. Once the third semester begins, the school holds a special exam that brings all three grade levels together. I went through the same thing last year. First, and second, and occasionally even third years battle it out.”

In other words, our class would be rubbing shoulders with upperclassmen this January.

“That’s also when Nagumo will start compiling his list of persons of interest among the first years,” added Kiriyama. Students that could potentially threaten Nagumo’s reign.

I would’ve preferred to go unnoticed. Unfortunately, I had a hunch that my wish wouldn’t be granted. “What happened in last year’s exam?”

“Probably nothing resembling this year’s exam. Most special exams are designed to be completely different from year to year.”

“Even so, information about last year’s exam might prove advantageous.”

“Maybe. But I can’t give it to you. Even if Horikita-senpai endorsed you, I can’t break school rules. If anyone found out, I’d be expelled.”

Made sense. If Kiriyama was part of Horikita’s faction, that meant he held school rules in high regard.

“Our options for fighting back against Nagumo are limited. Expulsion’s the surefire route, but hard to achieve lucky. The next-best option would be revealing to everyone that he’s unfit to serve as student council president. If Nagumo is removed from office, many second-year students will cut ties with him. That’d mean no harm will come to you first years, or to the incoming freshmen starting next year,” explained Kiriyama.

The problem here was that I didn’t know the *true* Nagumo Miyabi. Even Karuizawa couldn’t get me that information; we just had so little interaction with the seniors. Because Nagumo had accrued so much influence, was incredibly wary of others, and had Hirata’s respect and envy, I could only conclude that he was no average student.

I would’ve preferred Kiriyama to find second-year students who shared his opinion to help him take Nagumo down. Sadly, he didn’t

have that option, which meant he had to hassle first years.

"Wait. Getting Nagumo expelled, or pulled out of office—that's pretty serious, isn't it?" asked Karuizawa.

"You wouldn't resort to such measures in the face of a mortal enemy?"

"I've never even thought of doing something like that." Karuizawa looked suspicious, but I ignored her.

I didn't know how much I could trust Kiriyama. From what I saw, there was no doubt that he hated Nagumo. But I also saw that he was being very careful with his words, maybe to manipulate me. At present, I lacked enough information to reach a definite conclusion.

I'd only shown him one card I held: Karuizawa.

"Tell us what you want," I said. "We'll decide how to go about it."

"So, you can't trust me, is that it?" Kiriyama asked. "Maybe I sound like I'm going too far. I don't need to be responsible for stopping Nagumo. But I can't bear seeing my juniors go through the same hell I did. That's the truth."

So, he was just doing this for his juniors, huh? I found that selflessness hard to believe. Honestly, if Kiriyama said that he hoped to get back to Class A by eliminating Nagumo, I'd have trusted him more. *Guess it's just human nature to play the saint, huh?*

"Think whatever you want," Kiriyama added, "but just remember this. Every student who got on Nagumo's bad side has been expelled. Across the board."

"If that's the case, maybe I shouldn't get on his bad side, either."

"So, you won't cooperate?"

"I will. I have reasons I can't back down either."

"All right. You're on Nagumo's radar now, anyway. Sorry, but you're about to find out just what kind of person he is. I'll keep you informed on his movements from here on. As long as that's within the scope of the school rules, of course. Beyond that, you can do as you please."

So, he was putting his fate in my hands?

Kiriyama seemed to sense that I wasn't as enthusiastic as he might have hoped. "To be perfectly honest, you're kind of unreadable to me. If

it weren't for that relay race with Horikita-senpai, I probably wouldn't ask for your help at all. In fact, the relay was what made Nagumo notice you," he said.

Had I known about Nagumo in advance, I wouldn't have drawn attention to myself during the relay. Unfortunately, what was done was done.

"If I think you're incapable of seeing this through, I'll stop contacting you," Kiriyama added.

"Wouldn't that put you in more danger, Kiriyama-senpai?" asked Karuizawa.

He silently nodded. "I won't make direct contact with you after this. I'll create a random e-mail account and get in touch through that."

Good. Communicating via burner e-mail accounts was the safest option.

"Also…you know what'll happen if your incompetence leads Nagumo to find out that I colluded with you," he added. In other words, he'd take me down with him. Of course.

With those parting words, Kiriyama quickly left.

"Uh, does this whole thing kinda give you a bad vibe?" asked Karuizawa.

"Yeah."

There was no room for error.

6.1

KARUIZAWA AND I made our way back to the dorms. Walking a bit behind me, she spoke up. “It kinda seems like things are getting out of control.”

“What do you think of what Vice President Kiriyama said?” I asked.

“Uh, I don’t know. I mean, I still don’t really get why he hates President Nagumo that much.”

Karuizawa and I were on the same page. A wise man didn’t court danger. I’d been temporarily ready to make an enemy of Nagumo if it meant making Horikita’s brother my ally, but I was starting to think that wasn’t the right choice. If I could make Nagumo think my performance in the relay had been a fluke, he’d promptly forget all about me. If things went in the wrong direction, though, he’d try to eliminate me.

“By the way, what was that about earlier?” asked Karuizawa. “The ‘partner’ thing.”

“What, you didn’t like it?”

“If you just arbitrarily make me your partner, it’s not like I can do anything about it, right?”

“Should I take it back?” I asked.

“If you want me to officially be your partner, then you gotta show appreciation,” she replied.

“Can you explain to me specifically what you mean by appreciation?”

“Money?”

“Hey.”

“I’m just joking. I mean, you don’t seem to be in a position to lend me a lot of points, Kiyotaka,” she teased.

I’d expected her to say that. Thanks to the outcome of the test on the cruise ship, Karuizawa had more private points than I did.

“Wait a second. Is Horikita-san okay with this? I mean, she’d be a better partner for you, Kiyotaka. Right?”

“She just sits next to me in class. Nothing more and nothing less.” How many times did I have to repeat myself?

“Then I’m the only person who really knows you?” asked Karuizawa.

“You’re capable. That’s helpful to me.”

“O-okay.”

Horikita was capable too, but I wanted her in another role. I wanted to see her develop the qualities of a true leader. Led by Horikita, with Hirata and Karuizawa supporting her, Class D could become quite a force to be reckoned with. Whether that would come to pass, though, depended on Horikita.

“Well, guess I don’t have any choice. I’ll be your partner,” said Karuizawa. “Sticking with you might turn out well for me.”

“Don’t get your hopes up. You might get caught in the crosshairs alongside me, you know?”

“You mean, by the student council president?”

“Mainly, yes.”

“Well, you can handle him. Right, Kiyotaka? I mean, this is you we’re talking about.”

“If it came down to either physical strength or academic skill, I doubt I’d lose.”

“I figured as much,” Karuizawa replied with a grin.

“But there’s no telling what rules of engagement this school will set us next,” I added. “If Nagumo’s prepared to sacrifice his own people or destroy others, he could defeat us and get us expelled.”

“Destroy others?”

“Well, think about that one fight between Sudou and those Class C guys—Ishizaki and his friends. If the student council president had backed those Class C boys, Sudou’s fate might’ve been massively different.”

“Um, I didn’t pay attention to that whole fight thing.”

“I see. Well, don’t worry about it. All told, it’s actually relatively

easy to get someone expelled." Provided you were willing to sacrifice what you needed to make that happen.

"If he's not afraid to play dirty, that could be really bad news for you, huh, Kiyotaka?"

Karuizawa had hit the nail on the head. "Yep. That's exactly it."

There was way to be completely insured against defeat. The best I could do was invest in smart strategy and good allies.

"If it comes to that, I'll save you," said Karuizawa.

"You're very kind."

"Do you really mean that?"

"Yeah."

"I-I see. Anyway, Kiyotaka, I was wondering…what were you like in junior high? I mean, you weren't a normal kid, right?"

"Why do you say that? I could have been a completely average, run-of-the-mill student."

"No way. If *you're* normal, then the world's gone totally nuts." Karuizawa made a dramatic gesture, as if pushing the idea of my normalcy aside. "You're smart, and you're good in a fight, but you're really quiet. Sometimes you seem naïve about how the world works… and sometimes you do really messed-up things."

"What do you think I was like in junior high, based on what you've seen?" I asked.

"I'm asking because I don't know," she said, pouting.

"Take a guess." I wanted to hear the answer.

"Hmm." Karuizawa crossed her arms and tilted her head. "I mean, if we were in a manga or something, I'd say you were, like, some secret agent raised in an intense facility since early childhood. I dunno. I can't really think of anything else." She gazed far into the distance. She was way closer to hitting the mark than she knew. "Ugh. I have no idea. What's the answer?"

"That's a secret."

"Wha—?! Come on, you're not gonna tell me?"

"I never said I'd tell you."

"I'm definitely going to make you explain it all to me one day."

“It’s not a very interesting story. Don’t get your hopes up.”

Karuizawa didn’t seem to be listening to what I said. “Ah! It’s snowing.”

So it was. After looking at the sky, I lowered my gaze to see Karuizawa was staring at me.

“That reminds me. Satou-san didn’t end up giving you anything, did she? A Christmas present?”

“I dunno.”

“It’s no use trying to trick me. Did you notice the present the moment you met up with her?” asked Karuizawa.

She’d gotten to know me too well. She was right; the moment I’d met up with Satou, I’d noticed a present peeking out of her bag and known it was probably for me. Something Satou probably intended to hand over if her romantic confession went well.

“How’s it feel to have missed out?” Karuizawa asked in a teasing tone. “You’ve probably never gotten a present, have you? I mean, this is you we’re talking about.”

She pulled a small package from her bag and presented me it to me; making sure not to meet my eyes.

“It’s a Christmas present from me to you. Take it, and be grateful.”

“Are you sure?”

“You can think of it as a consolation prize for not starting a relationship today. Oh, and pay me back for about twice the amount it’s worth,” she teased.

“This kind of feels like I’m getting scammed.” I accepted the gift. “Did you buy this for me?”

“Obviously not. Yousuke-kun and I are supposedly dating, so I got this just in case I needed to make a public gesture or something. I went Christmas shopping with some other girls, so it wasn’t a total waste of time.”

“You don’t miss a thing, do you? Shouldn’t you have given it to Hirata?”

“I guess I would’ve. Normally.” Karuizawa was being kind of evasive. She immediately changed gears. “Hey, Kiyotaka. Sorry to bother you with this, but since we got on the subject of Yousuke-kun

earlier…”

“Hmm?”

“If I happened to, say…break up with Yousuke-kun…would I stop being useful to you?”

“Is that why you didn’t give Hirata your present?”

“Yeah. Is it wrong to talk about this, since things didn’t work out with Satou-san?”

Karuizawa was terrified that I’d find Satou more valuable than her. In truth, her breaking up with Hirata posed certain risks. It might decrease her social currency. Even if she was devalued, though, I’d still have use for her.

“You’re no longer the old Karuizawa. Even without Hirata, your current position wouldn’t change,” I told her.

“But me and Yousuke-kun breaking up isn’t something you’ve thought about before?” she asked. Her anxieties clearly weren’t trivial.

“If your value lay only in your relationship with Hirata, I’d tell you to never break up with him. The fact that I didn’t is my answer.”

That statement was more reassuring to Karuizawa than anything else could be. Since she understood the way I thought, she knew I wouldn’t lie. If Hirata Yousuke were an indispensable pawn to me, Karuizawa assumed I would’ve ordered her to protect my interests.

The truth, however, was that I’d anticipated Karuizawa would want to break up with Hirata. In fact, I’d nudged her toward it. My objective was to persuade her to disengage from Hirata and attach herself to a new host: me. Everything had gone according to plan so far. Though her crashing my date with Satou had been a surprise, I’d furthered my hold on Karuizawa as a result.

“I-I see. To tell you the truth, I talked about this with Yousuke-kun a little. About how dragging this out any longer probably isn’t good, since it’s just a pretend relationship. I’ve been hesitating,” said Karuizawa. “Besides, playing Yousuke-kun’s girlfriend gives me power, but it’s, like, also a lot of pressure.”

What a cute little lie.

I had no problem with her breaking up with Hirata, but from Karuizawa’s point of view, this was a mistake. If I’d been in her

position, I'd have kept some insurance, just in case. I would have sought to keep both Hirata and me around in case one of us turned out useless. *They say an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.*

Karuizawa understood that, too. Still, if she was willing to surrender her insurance, that was fine. It was better for her to focus her attention on one of us than lose both Hirata and me to carelessness.

"I'm sure the class will be really surprised when the third semester starts," mused Karuizawa.

"I suppose so."

As a couple, Hirata and Karuizawa were a big deal. They were well-known even outside our class. Hirata, in particular, would have potential girlfriends lining up at once.

"Do you think he'll go out with someone else?" I asked.

"I'm not sure. It's not like I know that much about Yous—I mean, Hirata-kun. But in some ways, he's kind of cold like you, Kiyotaka. He might not even be that interested in romance."

"Even though you're back to calling Hirata by his last name, you're still calling me by my first?"

"Oh. Y-yeah. Should I use your last name?" asked Karuizawa, appearing a bit crestfallen.

"That's not what I meant. Address me however you like." Thought I wasn't on a first-name basis with all my friends, some used my first name. "This might be a good opportunity," I mused. I stopped in my tracks and turned to Karuizawa. "I'll call you Kei from here on out."

"Huh? Wha…?!"

"Huh what?"

"N-n-nothing! Never mind! Why're you gonna use my first name, Kiyotaka?!"

KINO FAKA

“It feels kind of weird if I called you by your family name and you use my given name.”

I wasn’t quite sure how much distance existed between us, emotionally, but if Kei wanted to call me by my first name, it was only natural to reciprocate. Regardless, everyone else would see our relationship as a bit distant—Ayanokouji and Karuizawa. That wouldn’t change.

“By the way, you came up with the idea of this whole double-date thing, right?”

“Wh-what do you mean?”

I could see I’d hit the bull’s-eye. “You played your part pretty well, but Satou was off in a few places.”

“Ah. So, you noticed, huh? I also thought Satou-san was a little awkward.”

I reached into my pocket and touched a small paper bag. “Oh, yeah. I have a Christmas present for you, too.”

“Huh? You’re kidding!”

“I am indeed kidding.”

“Huh? You wanna get smacked?”

“Well, it’s just a regular gift. You may not find it necessary, but here you go.” I took out the paper bag and handed it to Kei.

“Wait a second. A drugstore bag? Are you making fun of me?” Kei peeled off the cellophane tape. Inside the bag, she found neither a fancy accessory nor a cute stuffed animal. “Two kinds of cold medicine and a receipt?”

“Just toss the receipt.”

She scanned it meticulously. “Hey, wait, the date says 10:55 a.m. on the twenty-third.”

“After buying that cold medicine, I was headed back to the dorms, and happened to see you and Satou together at Keyaki Mall. That’s when I realized you were concocting plans for a double date. Up to that point, I thought you must be sick after what’d happened on the roof. It seems I was wrong.”

“Then…that means you didn’t call me to check up because—”

“I didn’t even see you wearing a mask. I could tell you were healthy.”

“I-If you were worried about me, then…you could’ve visited me, or at least called once. You don’t have to do things in such a roundabout way. You could’ve confirmed that I was all right.”

“It wasn’t like I could just go to your room without being seen. Calling you would’ve been effective, sure, but I figured you might just act tough. You’re not good at showing other people your weakness, after all.”

“B-but… Wait, so you just wasted your money on cold medicine for me?” she stammered.

“The cost’s no big deal. If you don’t want those, I can save them for another occasion.”

“Now I feel like an idiot for thinking you weren’t worried about me,” said Kei.

“I played a major part in what happened to you on the roof. It was cruel. If you wanted to take a swing at me, I wouldn’t resist, to tell the truth. I avoided contacting you because I thought it would stress you out to hear me. Sounds like I was wrong, though.”

Kei drew closer to me. “Y-yeah, that’s right. Don’t underestimate me.”

“So, let me confirm one more thing, strong-hearted Kei.”

“What?”

“I intend to avoid drawing attention from here on out. However, there may be times when I need to move covertly. When I do, please help me.”

“Isn’t it kind of late to ask me that? You should’ve mentioned it when we talked about being partners earlier.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

After a brief silence, she sighed loudly. “Fine. I’ll lend you a hand. In exchange, protect me. Okay? If my relationship with Hirata-kun ends, there could be all kinds of trouble.”

“Sure. I promise.”

The sun began to set behind the clouds.

“Christmas is already over, huh?” said Kei.

Which meant the first year of our high school lives was almost at an end, too.

“Think we should head back?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

I started walking. Kei soon followed.

Kei was the person I’d grown closest to over the past year, and she probably felt the same about me. She became indispensable, somehow, before I even realized it. Perhaps, if I aimed for Class A and ended this drama with the student council, we could eventually be friends. Maybe even something more.

Postscript

Whew! It's sure cold lately. Have you avoided getting sick?

Hey, it's Syougo Kinugasa here. Just when I thought my immune system was improving, bam. Disappointment. I got sick twice at the end of the year alone. I feel like I'm doing much, much better than in previous years though. I'll achieve my final form in the near future, so please stay tuned.

I spent all my time working this past year, but I'm glad I did. Work can be tough, but it's amazing to have something to do. Still, having my schedule completely packed for the next three years or so is hard. You know, once in a while, I'd like to spend a month relaxing and taking it easy—like, in Hawaii, or Vegas, or something. You know? Go abroad?

I've actually never traveled abroad. Japan's the best.

Anyhow, that's how 2017 went. I greeted 2018 with some really expensive sake called Juyondai during the New Year (I have another bottle of expensive alcohol, but I haven't opened that one yet). I feel invigorated. I'm looking forward to the coming year.

Volume 7.5 is something of a supplementary story following up on the last volume, and gets into what certain characters thought after the rooftop incident. Also, I only just realized that the entire book takes place over three days. Huh.

As far as publishing goes, the next volume should be done in the first three months of the year. So, when will I deliver Volume 8 to you all? When *exactly* am I going to write it, you ask? Well, I can't tell you exactly, but you'll know when I do.

Volume 8 will mark the start of the third semester. The brief respite is over, and the students are thrown into another special exam. We've been focusing on Class D's rivalry with Class C so far, but that's about change. Will Sakayanagi go to war with Class B, like she said? Will Ayanokouji and Nagumo go head-to-head? Keep an eye on Class C, too, even though Ryuuen's out.

Well, see you all again at the end of April!

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